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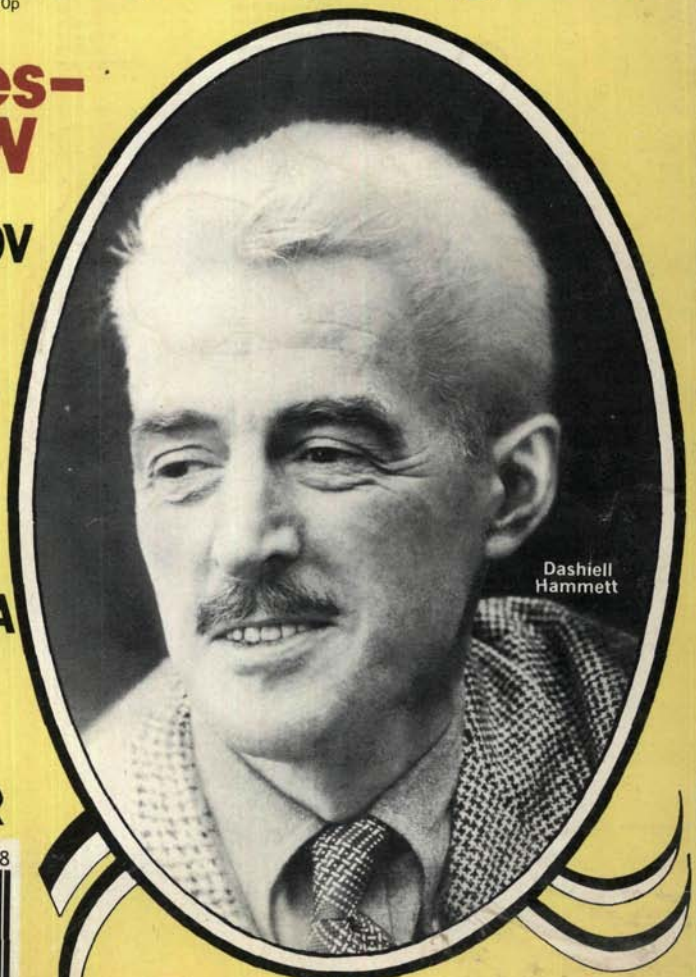

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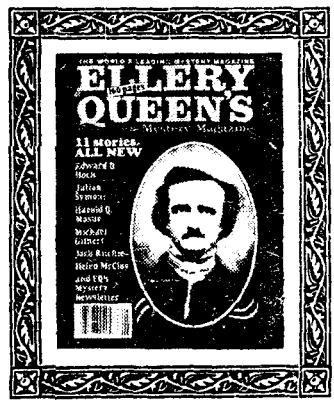

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a *NEW* detective story by

THOMAS WALSH

Ned Rochford was a first-class cop—"a hell of a cop"—a slim, dark, wiry, quick man who usually did most of the work on a case. But this case was different from any other he had ever worked on. You see, it involved Marty, his former partner, who has been thrown off the force for doing what so many others had always done and were still doing. Marty considered himself a patsy who had taken a bum rap for the whole department, and he had no loyalty left to his former colleagues, not even to Ned Rochford . . .

A HELL OF A COP

by *THOMAS WALSH*

There was no trouble about finding the right apartment house. When Tony Plaza and Ned Rochford got there about half-past three on that rainy November morning, the neighborhood prowl car was already double parked out front, the motor still on, and the red roof light flashing around and around with its usual effect of silent but ominous menace. The two uniformed men from the prowl car were in the apartment house hallway, and with them was a stout little baldheaded man who looked white as a ghost, and who kept mopping his cheeks and his forehead with a sodden handkerchief.

One of the uniformed men was named Charley Oster, and when Ned Rochford appeared he pointed casually to a small alcove back of the elevator. "In there," he told Rochford. "This guy here found him about ten minutes ago. A D.O.A., Ned. I just called the wagon."

"You touch anything?" Plaza demanded. He was the one who always took charge. Ned Rochford, slim, dark, wiry, and very quiet, was the one who usually did most of the work. Now he moved

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quickly back to the alcove where at first he saw nothing more than a potted plant in a large stone urn—but then, stuck out from behind it, an upturned palm, limply spread fingers, and a white band of shirt cuff.

"Didn't even step on the floor," Charley Oster assured Plaza. "Waiting for you, Commissioner. This guy here is Harry Collins. He lives in the house."

The dead man was staring at the opposite wall of the entryway with a vacantly startled expression. He had been shot once through the right temple, apparently within the last twenty or thirty minutes. When Rochford touched the out-flung right hand, it was still warm. For a moment he crouched over the body on one knee, then straightened slowly, his lips pursed.

"—just waiting for the elevator," the little fat man was explaining to Plaza. "But it don't show up, so I ring again, and just kind of look around the hall for myself. And then I saw—"

He stopped, shivering.

"Where were you standing?" Tony Plaza demanded. He had learned long ago to be very careful about such details, since unfortunately he was not very bright; so to Tony Plaza, unless and until they were positively cleared, every innocent bystander was a suspect.

"Well, where I said," Harry Collins explained nervously. "Right over there. Front of the elevator."

Plaza also took up that position, to test out.

"Can't even see him from here," he remarked aggressively. "What you trying to pull, Jack? Start lying about this and—"

"Could see the hand," Rochford pointed out. "Better come over here and take a look at who it is, Tony. George Williamson."

Plaza joined him, and they both looked down at the trim, well-dressed body, the insolently good-looking sharp features, and the dead eyes.

"But I think I know who did it," Harry Collins went on even more nervously. "A guy and a girl were running out the front door just as I was coming in. The girl was a platinum blonde and had a fur coat on. The guy was a real big fellow, real tough-looking. He only shoved out one hand and knocked me flat on my back like I was a kid. Then he yelled at the taxi that just dropped me off and they both jumped into it."

"Remember the cab driver's name?" Plaza barked. "They all got a little card with their name and their picture on it back of the front seat. What was his?"

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"I think," the fat man stuttered uncertainly, "I think it was Al Something."

"That's a help," Plaza said, looking him up and down contemptuously. "Al Something. You ought to have your name and address pinned to your shirt, buddy. Make sure you get home."

"Mr. Collins," Ned Rochford put in quietly again. "How did you know his first name was Al? He tell you?"

"Didn't have to," Collins admitted. "I'm a barkeep downtown, and Al picks me up every night at closing time. Then he goes home too. Last call."

"Then what's his full name?" Plaza demanded. "Where does he live?"

Collins grinned foolishly and shrugged. Once again Rochford took over.

"Goes straight home?" he asked. "A cabbie puts in a pretty long day, Mr. Collins. Doesn't he stop anywhere for a cup of coffee, or some ham and eggs? Most of them do."

"Well, yeah," Collins replied gratefully, as if glad to be reminded about that part. "He told me one night that there's a diner over on Tenth Avenue where all the drivers hang out."

"Tenth Avenue and where?" Tony Plaza wanted to know.

But again Rochford did it in the quicker and more effective way.

"Then let me give you a ride over there," he suggested. "Maybe you can pick him out for me, Mr. Collins. Tony, you stick here and see what happened to the elevator man. He might be able to help too."

"Yeah, I was just thinking of that myself," Plaza nodded back quickly. "Will do, Ned. You don't believe it's Marty, do you?"

"Can't tell you," Rochford admitted tightly. "Have to find out. Okay, Mr. Collins. Let's go."

The street outside was still cold, empty, and shadowed. The November rain still fell. But for some reason it felt colder and emptier than before to Ned Rochford, and at the corner he did not turn right for Tenth Avenue, but left for Third.

"Not this way," Collins protested. "You're heading wrong. I told you—"

"Hope I am," Rochford said, making the turn east. "But I want to stop somewhere else first. Think you can identify this big fellow if you saw him again?"

"Way he knocked me down?" Collins said indignantly. "Sure as hell can, mister. Damned near as big as Primo Carnera."

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Ned Rochford found that he had tightened his hands on the steering wheel, and had also tightened his lips. They turned left on Third Avenue, and a few blocks on turned left again into a side street of old three-story brownstones, each with a high stoop leading up to the front door. Double parking again, but unlike the prowl-car driver carefully removing his keys from the ignition switch, Ned Rochford led the way up into a small vestibule lit dimly by one weak ceiling bulb protected by dirty wire mesh. There Collins cleared his throat a bit edgily, and Ned Rochford put a reassuring hand on his arm.

"Nothing to worry about," he said. "It's just that I might know this big fellow, Mr. Collins. Let's see if I'm right."

"Well, sure," Collins said. "Citizen's duty, I guess. Only—"

Rochford gave him a placidly calming smile, but did not say anything more. When the release buzzer sounded, they went in and climbed two flights of stairs, Rochford again leading. There an apartment door had been opened and the tenant was peering out to see who they were.

"Well, look who's here," the tenant greeted Rochford amiably. "Come in, come in, Ned. Where you been keeping yourself all this time?"

"Hello, Marty," Ned Rochford said. "Been kicking around here and there, I guess. How's it with you?"

"Oh, pretty fair," the big man said, not seeming to recognize Harry Collins. "But I don't think I know your friend, Ned. How about a drink?"

There was stronger light in the room, and in there Ned Rochford looked back at Collins who gave him a quick, anxiously hurried nod, and moved back a step toward the hall door.

"No drink, Marty," Rochford said. "Business this time. Because my friend here thinks he knows you. In fact, he thinks he saw you leaving an apartment house in Greenwich Village maybe half an hour ago. That right?"

The big man, his back turned, poured himself out a slow drink. He rolled it around in the glass without answering immediately, inspected it against the light, then put it down in one swallow. When he turned finally, he had a cool lazy grin on his lips.

"I don't think he did—see me, I mean," he said. "Mixing up his faces, Ned. Wasn't me."

"Maybe not," Rochford agreed evenly. "Only we found George Williamson shot dead back of the elevator. Heard last week that you were working for him and Duke Hunter."

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"So that's it," Marty said, putting down the empty shot glass as slowly as he had picked it up. "So you just decided to drop in and check on Marty Harper, Ned?"

"Not much choice," Ned Rochford answered carefully. "I have an idea the lieutenant might like to see you about this, Marty."

"You do?" Marty said, still keeping his eyes on the empty shot glass. "Then I think you better get an idea to go back to the precinct and tell him he can want to see me all the hell he wants. I don't hop bells for him any more. Thought you knew."

"Stupid to blame him," Rochford said. "What could he do for you, Marty? What could anybody do?"

"No, blame me," Marty said, giving Ned Rochford an upward and savagely bitter glance from under heavy black eyebrows. "I was the first cop that ever got drunk in a public bar, wasn't I? He doesn't drink like a pig himself, of course—or you, either, at least once in a while. Not a damned one of you knows what liquor smells like, or that's what you made out. And who took the rap for the whole bunch? I did. For a stinking gang of heels without guts enough—"

Rochford grinned uncomfortably, took off his hat, and began to finger the crease.

"I know how you feel," he said. "I'd feel the same way myself, Marty. But the thing happened, that's all. Now get your hat and your coat, will you?"

"Sure, right away," Marty said. "He wants to talk to me, he can talk to me over here. I'm not going."

"I think I'd reconsider that," Ned Rochford said. "I wouldn't like to take you, Marty—but I would."

There was silence for a moment.

"Marty—" Rochford began.

"Go to hell," Marty said.

Ned Rochford put the hat back on, set his jaws, and moved forward. But as he did, the other man turned quickly, without any excitement at all, and directed the revolver in his right hand from Rochford to Harry Collins, who was gaping at him from the hall door.

"Don't be stupid, Ned," he warned softly. "The whole damn precinct couldn't take me, not if I don't want to go. And I don't!"

"This is a big help," Ned Rochford said wearily. "You know what you're doing, don't you? You're just making it tougher on yourself. I don't like this any better than you do—but you know the job, Marty."

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"Yeah, one time I did," Marty said. "But you ain't nothing at all to me now, Ned—not a damned thing. You hear that? So you and your friend just get over there in the bathroom. I'm locking you in."

At once Collins moved hurriedly toward the bathroom, but Ned Rochford stayed put.

"Good thing I know you," he remarked lightly. "Look here. I don't believe you're mixed up in this thing. The lieutenant won't, either. All I'm asking you to do—"

Marty hit him. He hit him not with the gun, but with a left fist as tough and almost as massive as a butcher's meatblock. It seemed to Rochford that the room danced around him, then blazed and erupted. He did not remember falling down, but he must have. When he began to come to, Harry Collins was leaning anxiously over him and forcing some of the whiskey down his throat. The hall door stood open. Marty Harper was gone.

"Blood all over your mouth," Collins whispered nervously. "God Almighty! I thought he knocked your head off."

Ned Rochford wiped the blood from his lips, but said nothing. There was a wall telephone near the bedroom. He used it.

"Looks like it's open and shut," Tony Plaza told him. "The elevator man says that a blonde girl came in with Williamson tonight. Then about a quarter past three Marty showed up, if it was Marty, rang for him again after about five minutes, and when he brought the elevator up, yanked him out and locked him inside a broom closet on that floor. What luck you having?"

"Not too much," Ned Rochford told him. "You know Marty. Better meet me over at that Tenth Avenue diner, Tony. Hackie Heaven, they call it. I guess the next thing to do is find out where the girl went."

"But what's it all about?" Collins inquired when they were back in the police car. "You knew that fellow, didn't you?"

"Used to," Ned Rochford said, in a flat, carefully stolid voice. "Or so I thought. A couple of years back we rode the same squad car. Could depend on him for anything then—and he could on me. That's the only way you can operate, Mr. Collins. No sweat at all about the fellow with you."

"Then what happened?"

Rochford drove silently for a minute, then he shrugged.

"It's one hell of a job," he said, "if I got to explain it to you. Sometimes the only way you can ease off after a tough night is to start hitting the bottle. That's what Marty did last January, and

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two junkies rolled him for his service revolver. Then they hold up a guy just outside the tavern and kill him when he shows fight. They were still carrying Marty's gun when they got caught, so the whole story comes out. All the papers raised hell about it, and the Commissioner had to give Marty the pink slip. It was just one of those things where no one could help him."

"Think I read about that," Collins said. "Only who's this Williamson that got himself killed? How come you were able to connect him so fast with this fellow Marty?"

"From some things we heard," Rochford explained curtly. "Marty tried this and that after the department let him go, but I guess nothing suited him. Then he landed a job as shotgun for your friend Williamson and a fellow named Duke Hunter, who run a floating crap game at a different hotel every night."

"What's a shotgun?"

"Guard," Ned Rochford said. He wiped his mouth with his handkerchief, then stuffed the handkerchief in his pocket when he found the bleeding had stopped. "There's always at least a hundred thousand dollars in cold cash lying around whatever room they're using. But of course even one stickup would kill off the game for them, and if they knew that Marty Harper had a reputation as a damned tough ex-cop, a lot of other people would know it too. That's why they hired him. He checked the customers in and out, and if anyone showed up with a gun he tossed him out on his ear. You don't argue too much with Marty Harper. But I never thought that he'd—"

"Can't always tell about people," Collins remarked timidly. "Not once they get the dry rot in them. After that it spreads out all over. They just aren't the same guys."

"I guess," Ned Rochford said, flat and toneless again. "That's right, Mr. Collins. No, they're not."

At the diner Tony Plaza was waiting for them, and Hackie Al was pointed out in one of the corner booths.

"Well, sure I remember," Al told them. "Classy little blonde broad and a fellow with her big as a house. First I dropped him off at—"

"We know that already," Ned Rochford interrupted with almost savage impatience—very unusual for Rochford. Tony Plaza blinked around at him. "Where did you drop the girl?"

So they got that address, and left Harry Collins behind in the diner. It was a tall narrow apartment house with the street door locked at this hour, and Tony Plaza had to kick at the iron grille before a sleepy-looking attendant showed.

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"You take a woman upstairs about an hour ago?" Plaza demanded of him. "Real cute little blonde, with a fur coat on?"

The doorman goggled down at his police shield and pulled open the door for them.

"Well, sure," he said. "She lives here. I—"

"Then take us to the same place," Plaza ordered. "What's the apartment number?"

In the elevator Ned Rochford's dark face got tighter and darker, and he kept staring down at his feet, not at Plaza or the doorman. They got off at the ninth floor, and there Ned got his police revolver out and held it under one side of his unbuttoned topcoat.

The doorman was still gaping after them, but when Plaza looked back at him he ducked into the elevator and slid the door shut. Ned Rochford pressed the bell, then drew his gun out into plain sight with his lips working.

The door opened.

Ned Rochford said, "Hold it, Marty," with an effect of very dangerous quiet in his tone. After that he pushed ahead into a big living room lit by three shaded floor lamps, and saw a pretty blonde girl wearing an almost topless black evening gown jump up off the couch.

"And you too," Tony Plaza told her. "Looks like you're moving in pretty high-class society, Marty. Looks like you're doing pretty good for yourself, eh? But don't try anything on Ned and me. This time we're ready for you. Just watch how you use your hands."

"Pretty fast," Marty Harper said, ignoring him, but with his eyes fixed steadily on Rochford under his heavy black brows. "And pretty good, Ned. Never thought you knew even her name."

"I don't yet," Rochford said. "Put your hands out and lean against the wall, Marty. That's the way you wanted it, remember. I'm nothing to you any more. You're nothing to me. Look him over, Tony. See if he still has the gun on him."

And Marty Harper did have it. Humming airily to show how casual and unconcerned he was, Tony Plaza emptied all the bullets into his palm, then sniffed the muzzle.

"No smell," he informed Rochford. "But what the hell. Let Ballistics worry about it. Now we did our part. We got them both, Ned."

Marty Harper rubbed one of his big hands over his mouth, still watching Rochford steadily and silently. Rochford watched him.

"Hey, babe," Plaza said. "Get on your hat and coat over there. They're right by you. Who killed Williamson? Him?"—and his right

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thumb jerked back at the big man. "You got to think about protecting yourself, doll. Number One, this is—the big rap. Nothing to laugh about."

Marty spoke to the girl without looking around at her. He still faced Rochford as if they were alone in the room.

"Keep your mouth shut," he said. "We got Larry Weinberg as counsel, and we don't have to answer one damn question until he gets here. I'll call him right now. It's all right, Janice."

"No, not for you," Rochford said, eye to eye now, man to man. "And don't move even one step, Marty. Not after what you pulled on me back at your place."

"No constitutional rights?" Marty drawled. "Then I guess you don't happen to recall the time we hit that joint up in East Harlem, Ned. You'd have got it right between the eyes, only I was able to give that real quick little killer his constitutional rights with the back of a chair. But you don't remember no more?"

"I remember," Ned Rochford said. "But don't touch that phone, not even with your fingers. Cuff his wrists, Tony."

Out in the hall again, Marty Harper with his overcoat hanging loosely around his shoulders and his two wrists handcuffed behind him, they all rode down again in the same elevator, but this time without the doorman looking sleepy at all. No one said anything. They were just dropping past the fourth floor when the buzzer rang, and a small white circle popped up on the board indicating street level.

There Tony Plaza got out first, the girl second, Marty Harper third, and Ned Rochford fourth. But Marty moved only a step or two. At that point, as soon as he saw the two men who had rung for the elevator and as if fully prepared for them, he lunged back with one battering-ram shoulder against Ned Rochford and knocked him sprawling.

One of the two men looked very dapper in a light green Tyrolean hat and a white overcoat with a dark fur collar around the top. The other one had a grinning, city-wise face, and before Ned Rochford could straighten up, was showing him a gun down against his side, where the elevator man could not see it. Tony Plaza stopped dead, a foolish grin on his lips. The blonde girl began to sob hysterically.

Then the fellow in the white overcoat addressed the elevator man in a gently persuasive tone.

"Take that thing down to the basement," he said, "and keep it down there for ten minutes. Have a cigarette or something. Then

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when you come up, you didn't see us tonight, and you didn't see them. Got that straight?"

"Yes, sir," the elevator man faltered. "Whatever you say, Mr. Hunter. Didn't see anything—nothing at all."

The elevator went down.

"And you," the man said, hate in his voice as he looked over at Janice. "You know where to go. Wait for me there. I'm going to teach you something about fooling around on Duke Hunter. Which of them has the keys to your handcuffs, Marty?"

"Plaza," Marty Harper said, and with the lazy grin on his lips glanced around at Ned Rochford. "Kind of real slow that time," he said. "Must be slipping, Ned. Should have figured when I let you in so easy upstairs that I might have been expecting company."

"That's right," Ned Rochford admitted, his long sallow face showing no hint of emotion on it. "I never could hit the high fast one, Marty. Always a popup."

"Duke—" the girl wept.

"Out," Duke Hunter said, slapping her across the mouth. "Hear what I'm telling you?"

She ran out through the street door then, still sobbing, and Duke Hunter, very careful about it, took Plaza's gun and Ned Rochford's, and handed the third one back to Marty.

"So they found out?" Duke Hunter asked.

"Looks like they did," Marty Harper said, still grinning. "Here, ain't they?"

"No problem," Duke Hunter said. "You drive, Marty"—and tossed a ring of keys at him. "The car's just outside. They're going to sit in front with you, both of them. That way Johnny and I will be in back, so let them try something."

"Say, listen here," Tony Plaza blustered. "We're police officers, see? So don't think you can—"

Marty Harper extended one arm lazily and slapped Plaza on the side of the head. It did not appear to be a very hard slap, but even so Tony Plaza was knocked against the corridor wall, where his hat fell off. He picked it up slowly, a dazed, frightened look in his eyes.

Would there be anyone on the street? Ned Rochford found himself wondering effortfully. Anyone at all? But there was not, not at a few minutes past five in the morning. The rain had slackened off to a light mist, through which the high street lamps shone round and dim, as if beaded with dull gold. Marty Harper trotted around to the driver's side and got in there. First Plaza and then Rochford

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were pushed after him. The other two men got in the back. As soon as they had, Marty Harper, always one hell of a driver, Ned Rochford found himself remembering for no sensible reason, zipped back, zipped out with one spin of the wheel, and took the first corner fast but carefully.

"Where to?" he said.

"I think Central Park," Duke Hunter said. "It ought to be nice and quiet there this time of night. Any objections to what we have to do now, Marty? No other way out, I'd say. But how do you feel about your old sidekicks?"

Marty kept his eyes straight ahead. The lazy grin had turned hard and ugly.

"Nothing to me," he said. "Not any more. Dog eat dog. They were bringing me in, Duke."

"Hey, wait a minute," Plaza whispered shakily. "I worked with you lots of times. So did Rochford. You can't let them—"

Duke Hunter negligently cuffed the back of his head, knocking it forward. "Don't waste your breath," he said. "He's in it as much as we are, as me and Johnny here. Accessory before the fact, remember? So what? Just think it over, walyo. Use your head."

They entered the park. In his time Ned Rochford had shot one or two men, and had watched others die, and several times he had wondered uncomfortably how he would take it when his turn came up. He discovered that he had never even suspected how.

All at once the muscles in his calves and his thighs began to jump erratically. No, no, no, he kept whispering to himself. No, no! Couldn't be! If he were a block away it would mean perfect safety for him, even half a block. But never like this, with the lonely dark streets black as polished steel from the rain, and now the trees looming up like menacingly silent ghosts on each side of the road. He felt as if he were sitting in a box packed tight with invisible cotton wool, not a sound to be heard, and with no way to get out. No, no, no. No, no!

A car raced by them and Plaza attempted to shout at it, but the shout would not come.

"Hear that?" Johnny giggled. "Wonder what he was trying to say, Duke?"

"Maybe he wanted to know the time," Duke Hunter said. "Twenty minutes past five, walyo. Don't get impatient."

Marty Harper glanced over at Ned Rochford, the same ugly grin still on his lips.

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"How you feeling?" he asked.

"Like a man," Ned Rochford said, glad he could keep his voice under control. "Maybe better than you, Marty."

"Oh, better than any of us," Duke Hunter said. "Don't qualify, pal. But I guess anywhere along here, Marty. In under those trees."

"But I'd kind of like them to beg first," Johnny giggled. "Five minutes more if you get down on your knees, fellas. How about it?"

"Shut your mouth," Marty Harper said then, suddenly and savagely. "You little punk, you. Or you want me to shut it?"

"Now, now," Duke Hunter said. "They got to go, that's all, and you know it as well as I do. Pull in here."

He and Johnny got out first and stood together by the door on the passenger side, next to Ned Rochford. Distantly, but very distantly, so no help at all, a police siren began screaming and screaming. Duke opened the door.

"Out," he said.

"Yeah, end of the line," Johnny giggled. "Just turn your back, you rat flatfoot, and brace yourself. You know what, Duke? I'm going to enjoy this. One of them slapped me all around my own apartment last week, and just for nothing."

Marty Harper had got out on the other side of the car. He was so big that he stood chest and shoulders above it. Ned Rochford could see him taking the gun out of his belt holster, and felt an instant of hope. It was an empty gun, he remembered suddenly. Tony Plaza had taken the bullets out in the girl's apartment.

"You'd enjoy shooting your own mother," Ned Rochford heard Marty say grimly, "if she had the price of a fix on her. So one of us slapped you around just for nothing, hah? Well, I'd slap you around for less than that even, you crummy little hophead."

"One of us?" Duke Hunter said, inflecting that question slightly. "Better pay attention to what you're saying, Marty. Sounds a little funny to me."

That time Marty Harper did not answer, but perhaps his expression changed.

"Keep your gun on him, too, Johnny," Duke Hunter ordered, sounding urgent about it. "Just in case. Any cars coming?"

"Not a one," Johnny giggled. "Don't worry, Duke. I'll show him hophead, all right. I'll blow his head off."

And Ned Rochford saw him steady himself against the car, both hands on top of it. Duke beckoned then. "I told you to get out," he said to Rochford. "And I mean now, mister. O-u-t."

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Which also was very queer. Ned Rochford did not mean to obey the order, but he did. Behind him, Tony Plaza had begun whispering breathlessly. But Ned Rochford did not seem to be afraid any more. All he felt then were savage hatred and even more savage contempt, looking back with curled lips at Marty Harper over the car top. But that time, with his muscular arms spread wide apart, and the empty gun in his right hand, the other man refused to look back at him. And his expression had changed. His eyes looked to Ned Rochford darker and hotter than before, and his mouth had twisted up as if he suffered a spasm of sudden physical torment.

"Duke," Marty said, in a scarcely audible tone of voice. "Wait a minute. Ned Rochford and me used to ride the same prowl car. He saved my life. I saved his. We didn't ever have to depend on anybody else. See how I feel? Ned and me always—"

"He has to go," Duke Hunter said calmly. "No arguments, Marty. He has too much on us now, on all of us. Think of that. Don't talk like a damned fool."

Marty Harper pointed the gun at him—the empty gun.

"No," he said, also calmly. "I'm telling you, Duke. Not Rochford."

Duke ducked down madly, and right into Ned Rochford's arms. "Take him," he was screaming at Johnny. "And take him right now! Go ahead!"

But then Rochford had him. They rolled off the side of the car, struggling wildly, and as they did, grinning Johnny fired twice over their heads. At that even Tony Plaza woke up. He pushed out of the car cursing and scrambling, and Ned Rochford, with the oddly peaceful smell of wet grass in his nostrils, discovered that he had twisted away Duke Hunter's gun. As he lifted it, Johnny spun quick as a cat to shoot Plaza, but he had no time. There was only one shot after that. It was Ned Rochford's.

Then, however, there was nothing at all to be heard from the other side of the car, and nothing to be seen, either. Flipping the gun underhand to Plaza, and then running around the trunk in back, Ned Rochford found Marty sitting against the rear wheel with his eyes closed and both his arms crossed over his chest. When he heard Ned Rochford he opened the eyes and tried to straighten himself, but could not.

"Think maybe I got brushed," Rochford heard. "But the hell with that. Only thing I could do. Only chance I could give you. And he'll know what to do with it, way I figured. He always did before. Hell of a cop, Ned Rochford. Him and me—"

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He began to cough. Ned Rochford tore open his coat and shirt, then winced off helplessly from what he saw inside.

"Why the hell did you do it?" he said. "You knew Plaza had taken the bullets out. You saw him."

"Yeah, guess I did." Marty Harper grinned up painfully. "But Duke Hunter didn't. Was counting on that, Ned, counting on it. Hard lines, hah?"

Plaza appeared.

"I got the other guy cuffed to the steering wheel," he panted. "And you got the hophead dead center, Ned. Thanks a lot."

"Stop a car," Ned Rochford ordered thickly. "Run like hell, Tony. We need an ambulance here."

Marty Harper coughed a second time, deep in the chest—a choked, breathless cough.

"Looks like we did it again," he whispered. "You and me, Ned. So they got you working with Tony Plaza now. How is it?"

"Not like it was with you," Ned Rochford said. "Nothing like it at all, Marty. But keep quiet now. The ambulance ought to be here in two minutes."

"Don't care too much," Marty Harper got out, with even more effort. "Best way to end it, maybe. They fought over the blonde, Ned. That's why Duke shot him. He found them together. But Janice was pretty hysterical when she phoned me to come over, and I was afraid the elevator guy would notice her face when we went out. So I rang for him to come up and then locked him in a broom closet. I was hoping, when you found George downstairs, you'd think he'd been mugged in the hallway. What spoiled it for me?"

"The cab driver," Ned Rochford explained. "The little fat fellow you knocked down always used the same one. No trick at all to locate Janice then."

"Always missed something," Marty Harper whispered, letting his breath out in slow soft gasps, not to cough any more. "Never as good as you, Ned. But you know what I'd like now? Stick with me till the ambulance comes. I want it just the way it used to be, Ned. Helps a little. You and me."

"Just like it is," Ned Rochford said. "You and me, Marty. All the way."

But when the ambulance came, minutes later, it was only Ned Rochford holding Marty Harper's hand, not Marty holding his any more. There was a very young intern first, then two older attendants, and while they were doing what they could, Ned Rochford

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walked away from the car and back under the trees. After a while he heard Plaza behind him.

"Come on," Plaza urged. "Let's get started, Ned. We have to make our report now. It's all over."

"What?" Ned Rochford said. It was not that he failed to hear, but that his mind was on other things. He turned finally, running one hand down his side in a quick delicate movement. Then he walked out into the road after the two ambulance men, and what they were carrying.

"Yes, I know," he said. "But I promised him, Tony. All the way."

"Q"

DETECTIVERSE

LEAST LIKELY SUSPECT

by A. REEVES CAMP

He sat down at the bar and scratched his head.
"And what will you have?" the bartender said.
"Just give me a beer," said Detective Hughes,
"While I sit and sort out these murder clues.
"A rag and a bone and a hank of hair.
"Of course—it must mean a woman was there.
"There's a silver cord and a butcher knife.
"Could be the daughter or could be the wife.
"But why am I wasting all of this time?
"Murderers return to the scene of the crime.
"*I'll* just return to the scene of the crime,
"And arrest whoever is there at the time."
But since no one showed up for him to see,
Said Detective Hughes, "My goodness, it's *me!*"

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a *NEW* suspense novelet by

JANE SPEED

Uncle Jack Cunningham—"Dapper Jack"—was as unlikely a person to assume the role of detective as you've ever come across. But at least he tried. In Howard Cunningham's "castle," where Howard ruled as a king (it would be more accurate to say, as a warden in a "prison"), Uncle Jack was considered a frail reed, a sponger and freeloader who merely fetched and carried for Howard, a weakling and an incompetent not worthy of even a walk-on role in a serious drama. And it was a serious drama . . .

FURTHER INSTRUCTIONS 9 P.M.

by JANE SPEED

A Sunday drive through the community of Fairhill "to see how the other half lives" would hardly be complete without a turn along Shady Lawn Road past the Howard Cunningham estate. The house is hidden from view by a handsome fieldstone wall, so all that the curious really get for their trouble is a glimpse, through the entrance gate, of a well-tended drive winding away amid lush greenery.

"It looks like a prison," is a frequent observation, and allowing for a certain amount of sour grapes, a just one. The massive gate set in that imposing wall does suggest a way of life as difficult to get out of as it is to get into. But then, who would ever want to escape from so luxurious a "prison"?

Well, believe it or not, the wish had at least crossed the mind of nearly everyone connected with that prickly household.

Howard's son Kevin, for one, often toyed with the notion. Idly, of course, since gumption, as his father regularly reminded him, was a quality in which Kevin was woefully deficient. If he didn't shape

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up, went the warning, he'd turn out as good-for-nothing as his Uncle Jack.

And Uncle Jack himself, the unsuccessful Cunningham, could not help but entertain fitful if futile thoughts of breaking free. Some 23 years ago Howard put it to him bluntly: "You're my brother and I don't want to see you starve, so you can move in here and work for me. Take it or leave it." Jack took it, and was taking it still. All in good part, to be sure; when asked what he did for a living, Jack replied with engaging candor, "I fetch and carry for Howard." It always got a laugh.

And surprisingly, even the Cunningham daughter Betsy had begun to chafe at her silken bonds. Betsy was a girl with gumption to spare and a haunting resemblance to her dear, departed mother Elizabeth. Betsy's twenty-first birthday party had been a lavish affair with scores of friends to help celebrate the occasion.

Yet, after the guests had departed, Betsy seemed oddly subdued as she shared a nightcap with Kevin, Uncle Jack, and Kate Briggs, Howard's live-in secretary.

Jack, always alert to Betsy's moods, said, "A penny for your thoughts, princess."

Betsy sighed. "I looked around at all those people tonight and I suddenly wondered how many of them would have been there, how many would be my friends if I weren't Howard Cunningham's daughter."

The touching thoughtfulness of her reply left Jack momentarily at a loss. But not Kevin, that cynic of 24. "Oh, one or two, perhaps," he quipped. "With luck."

"Nonsense," Kate said crisply. "I'm sure you both have many good and loyal friends."

Betsy had paid scant attention to this exchange. She took a sip of her drink and went on earnestly, "And another thing. I'm reasonably intelligent and I've had a good education and I would *really like to know* if I'm capable of getting and holding a useful job."

"Good heavens!" Kate laughed. "If that's all that's bothering you, dear, I'm sure your father could—"

"Oh, I'm sure he could," Betsy came back with dangerous sweetness. "A few well-placed phone calls from Daddy and all doors would open wide. If Betsy Cunningham has taken it into her silly head to want a job, then a job she shall have. If there isn't one available, one will be made for her. And whether she does it well or badly, she'll be praised to the skies. And, of course, she'll hold on to it just

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as long as it suits her whim to do so, because no one would dare to fire Howard Cunningham's daughter." Betsy ended her tirade with a scornful, "A lot that would prove."

"I know what you mean," said Kevin, dead-serious for once. Then, quickly reverting to his usual flippancy, he added, "But I'm afraid, old girl, that is the cross we rich must bear."

"Honestly!" Kate set down her empty glass with a bang and stood up. "I've had enough of you two. I'm going to bed." She headed for the door, but halfway there she turned and regarded them with amused exasperation. "The cross you bear, indeed! I'd like to remind you spoiled darlings how many, many people would give their eye-teeth to be in your shoes." Then she swept out.

Jack sighed and stared into his glass. He could see Kate's point; she'd worked long and hard to get where she was. But Betsy had a point, too. They were both right.

"You know . . ." Betsy said, "that's really the only way I could find out for sure."

Kevin looked blank. "You've lost me."

"Me, too," said Jack.

"What Briggsy said—about being in someone else's shoes. If I could do that—go away and be plain Jane Jones or Mary Smith—just for a year or so . . ." She let the sentence trail off, her eyes alight with the intriguing possibilities.

The two men exchanged a here-we-go-again look.

"Why not?" Kevin shrugged. "Easiest thing in the world. Just ring up your friendly fairy godmother and—hey, presto!"

"Oh, stop it, Kevin. I'm serious."

"Then"—Kevin rose and stretched—"you are not only a spoiled darling, you are also a nutty one. Look. Betsy. Use that reasonable intelligence you claim. You are your daddy's special treasure and there are very few things in the world he would deny you. But if you went to him with a hare-brained scheme like this—" Kevin spread his hands eloquently and on that note departed.

"He's right, you know," Jack said.

"Mmmm." Betsy conceded the point and lapsed into thoughtful silence. "I guess," she said at last, "the only way to work it would be not to tell him in advance. Oh—I'd write him a letter explaining what I'd done, of course, so he wouldn't worry."

Jack shook his head and rose with a chuckle. It was a waste of time arguing with Betsy when she was off in Cloud Cuckooland like this. He leaned over and kissed her lightly on the cheek. "Happy

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birthday, beautiful dreamer," he said. Then he, too, went on up to bed.

That was in March. Early one Saturday in June, Jack was rudely awakened by the sound of Howard's voice raised in anger. Jack lay there for a minute, tense and puzzled. Then he sighed. Ah, yes, the weekend fishing trip. Betsy'd had the right idea, he thought enviously. She'd cleared out yesterday before the fireworks began—went to spend a couple of weeks in the city with her Aunt Bea. Any place was better than here when Howard was getting ready to go somewhere.

It had not always been that way. In earlier years Howard had traveled easily and often, too often perhaps, right up to and including the traumatic night Elizabeth died giving premature birth to Betsy. Abruptly then, as though to do penance for having left Elizabeth alone so much, Howard converted the west wing of the house into a suite of offices and now conducted his business affairs largely from there.

Indeed, he seldom left the fortress of his home. And when he did have occasion to venture forth—even, as today, on a short trip merely for pleasure—his departure was invariably fraught with crisis. The smallest hitch in his travel preparations, and there was always something, caused him to lash out savagely at all and sundry.

These periodic tantrums were very likely a sign of Howard's deep-seated reluctance to leave his domain, his fear that something dire would happen in his absence, as once it had.

But whatever the cause, the effect on the hapless victims was lacerating. So, though Jack was now awake beyond recall, he prudently stayed put. It was not till he heard the sound of a car starting down the drive to the gate that he finally pulled himself out of bed.

Jack was a bit of a dandy about his appearance. "Dapper Jack"—that's what Howard called him. But this morning he dawdled even longer than usual over shaving and dressing. The truth was, he always found it rather awkward to face the servants after one of Howard's rampages.

At last, however, there were no more touches to be added. Jack consulted his watch. He ought to be able to slip down the back stairs to the kitchen and snag himself some breakfast. If he was right, by now the cook would be closeted with Mrs. Timmons, the housekeeper, making out the menus for the coming week.

He was wrong, alas. The cook was still there, red-faced with rage,

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trying to comfort the weeping serving maid Jeanie. The sight of Jack was apparently the last straw. "*You* never come down for breakfast on Saturday," she said accusingly.

"All I want is coffee," he assured. "I can get it myself."

"There isn't any made," she announced with a kind of mean satisfaction. "He dumped it down the drain. Said it wasn't fit to drink." And it would have taken a more courageous man than Jack to ask her to make a fresh pot.

Instead, he headed for the dining room in hopes there might be something left on the table. He slowed down as he approached, hearing voices—Kevin's and Kate's by the sound. Jack peered cautiously around the arch, then drew back quickly when he glimpsed Kevin's tight, bitter face.

Kate, whose thankless task it always was to minister to the casualties Howard left in his wake, was speaking soothingly: "Oh, Kevin dear, you know what he's like when he's in these moods. He doesn't mean half of what he says."

But Kevin wasn't having any. "Always the optimist, aren't you, Briggsy?" he sneered. And he couldn't just leave it at that. Having been injured, he sought to injure in turn. "You probably still believe Dad will marry you one day."

Jack winced, and in the pained silence that followed stole noiselessly away. He hadn't thought Kevin could be so unkind.

Then in the hallway Jack encountered another of the walking wounded. Arthur, the butler, barely acknowledged Jack's greeting, his normally jovial mien bleak and stony, mute evidence that he too had run afoul of Howard. And Jack crept past the library without even risking a "good morning" to Anna, one of the cleaning staff, who was slamming the vacuum around as if she had Howard himself by the tail.

"Like stepping through a minefield," Jack muttered as he finally made it out the French doors to the patio.

The mailman drove up and waved, the first cheerful sign Jack had seen this morning. Jack responded effusively and trotted across to the drive to get the mail.

As he strolled back with it, Kate came out on the patio. She watched his approach with wry amusement. "You missed all the excitement," she said. "Coward!"

"Oh, now," Jack demurred. "Let's just say I have a highly developed sense of self-preservation."

"Kevin could use some of that," Kate remarked drily. "He ought

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to know enough by now to stay out of his father's path on days like this." She eyed the fat bundle of mail Jack was carrying. "Well, we really hit the jackpot this morning, didn't we?"

He held it out to her but she waved it away. "No, no. Just put it on Howard's desk, will you? I haven't time to sort it now. I've got to go calm down Mrs. Timmons. She went to her room in tears. And guess what?" she added with mock brightness. "George is coming." George Petrie was Howard's lawyer.

"I thought he was on vacation."

"He is. But Howard called him this morning and ordered him back immediately. His plane gets in at two o'clock."

"But why today?" Jack looked mystified. "Howard won't be home till late tomorrow night and he'll go straight to bed. He always does."

"Exactly," said Kate. "So George will just have to cool his heels around here till Monday morning. He'll be furious. Oh, well." She shrugged. "*My* vacation begins Friday, thank God. I guess I'll survive till then."

"You've earned it."

"You bet I have!" said Kate feelingly. "My bags have been packed for a week and I'm leaving on schedule come hell or high water."

"Atta girl!" Jack called after her as she marched off to deal with Mrs. Timmons.

Then, shaking his head, he went on into the house with the mail. Right now, he reckoned, there probably wasn't a soul under this roof—or soon to be, if you included furious George—who didn't long to spit in Howard's eye and walk away forever. But—they wouldn't. A habit of eating regularly and well is hard to break, as who should know better than he? No, they'd just swallow their pride and go on as before. Such is the power of the purse strings.

He entered the west wing, went through Kate's office into Howard's, and dumped the mail on the desk. It was a handsome office, spacious and richly gleaming, as befitted one in Howard's position.

Since it was also empty, Jack sat down and took his ease in Howard's beautifully engineered swivel chair. He leaned forward, and brushing aside a couple of flyers advertising Kenny's Kar Wash and the A-One Messenger Service, he leafed through the real mail on the remote chance there might be something for him. And for a second he actually thought there was; the handwriting on one letter marked Personal was so dearly familiar. But it was addressed to Howard, of course. Betsy hadn't written to Jack much since her

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days at summer camp. Why should she? Uncle Jack had no power to grant any grownup request she might make.

Come to think of it, though, why should she write a letter at all? She was only at Bea's, a short phone call away. And she'd just left yesterday . . . there was hardly time. Jack examined the postmark. Ah, that explained it. It had been mailed right here in Fairhill. But then—he frowned—she must have written it before she left and dropped it at the post office on her way. Funny thing to do.

Something pricked at Jack's memory—something Betsy had said—ages ago. Yes, that night after her party. What was it? Something about writing to Howard explaining what she'd done. Oh, but that was just a lot of airy-fairy nonsense. Even Betsy, in the cold light of day, must have—

Yet, here in his hand was this letter. It was certainly Betsy's handwriting. He turned it over. She'd even written it on that stationery Jack had given her for her birthday—the kind with those convenient flaps you don't have to moisten to seal; you just press them down and they stick.

As a matter of fact—he inserted a thumb experimentally at one edge—they can also be peeled open without much damage to the envelope. Of course, he'd never do such a thing. It was unthinkable, unforgivable. But so easy, and his scruples were simply no match for his curiosity. Gently he worked the flap open and removed the letter.

And, by God, he was right! There it was, Betsy's explanation, in much the same words she'd used to him and Kevin three months ago. With an earnest addendum, so like her: "This is very important to me, so I beg you *not* to send someone to try to find me and bring me back." Then a final sentence, written separate and large for emphasis: "Please, Daddy, *this is no joke*. Betsy."

And Jack was sure it was no joke. Betsy was a girl of her word. But she was supposed to be at her Aunt Bea's, so how. . . ? Then he laughed and shrugged. Betsy had probably handled that with a simple phone call to say she couldn't make it this weekend. Bea would think nothing of that; it had happened before. Jack was tempted to call Bea right now and check it out. But he remembered just in time that he wasn't supposed to know about all this yet.

He sat back in the chair and shook his head. Damn. He should have paid more attention to the determined gleam in Betsy's eye that night after her party. Why, she must have started making her plans from that moment. She'd visited Bea half a dozen times since

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then—plenty of opportunity to rent herself an apartment under another name, maybe even get herself a job. Because Jack had no doubt that the city was where she'd gone. Where better to lose yourself than in a horde of strangers?

His heart contracted a little at the thought of darling, sheltered Betsy on her own in that teeming jungle. Still, she was a bright girl and basically sensible. And his misgivings were eclipsed by a surge of proud elation. There were so many who ached to break free of Howard, but Betsy—brave, foolhardy Betsy—had actually done it. She'd escaped for them all. And, by gum, if it were up to him, he'd leave her to it; let her try her wings, find her own worth.

But, of course, it was not up to him. And he really couldn't picture Howard being swayed even by that heartfelt plea at the end of her letter. Howard would be blind to everything but his wrath at such upstart behavior; and, to be fair, his concern for Betsy's safety outside the protective cocoon. So he'd lose no time in sending someone—a whole army of someones, if necessary—to find her and bring her back.

Not the police, of course; Howard's low opinion of the police was legend. No, he'd arrange this himself, as he did most things. And, given the formidable advantages of his money and his connections, sooner or later he would probably prevail. But maybe later rather than sooner? Betsy was not a fool and this plan of hers had been three months in the making.

In any case, Jack intended to savor the triumph to the full while it lasted. Just to witness Howard's apoplectic reaction to this letter would be a treat in itself. Let's see now, Kate would sort the mail, deal with the business stuff herself, and place the personal letters beside Howard's plate Monday morning. Jack rubbed his hands in anticipation. That was one morning he'd be down to breakfast on the button.

The angry sound of the vacuum cleaner nearing the west wing suddenly reminded Jack of the extreme awkwardness of his position. Good Lord! Anyone could wander in any time and there he sat in Howard's chair reading Howard's mail. He rose hastily, slipped the letter back into the envelope, resealed it, and tossed it on the pile.

And not a minute too soon. Going out the door he nearly collided with Kevin coming in.

"Oh—sorry." Kevin still looked grim. "Didn't know you were here."

"Kate asked me to bring in the mail," Jack mumbled and hurried

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past, not trusting himself to say more. For he could already see another danger looming large. He didn't dare confide his ill-gotten knowledge to anyone, but he had a feeling it was going to take all the will power he had to keep it bottled up inside him till Monday.

It did.

When George Petrie arrived, for instance, quite as furious as predicted, Jack was sorely tempted to smooth his ruffled feathers with a confidential, "Just wait till Monday morning, old man. You'll find it worth the trip, believe me."

He managed to resist the impulse, but the effort gave him a look of barely suppressed merriment, causing George to snarl, "What the hell are you so cheerful about?"

George's ire was understandable. He'd had to leave Lois, his practically new bride, alone on a Bahamian beach, and quite probably for nothing much. "I'm sick and tired of jumping every time Howard cracks the whip," he fumed. "By God, for two cents, I'd . . ." His voice trailed off in the frustrating realization that he couldn't do anything that might jeopardize the fat fees the Cunningham account brought to his firm. So he simmered down and said, with as much dignity as he could muster, "If anyone wants me I'll be in Howard's office," and huffed off to the west wing.

Jack tried to avoid Kate altogether. She was much too easy to talk to and he was much too fond of talking. But when he encountered her lugging an armload of newspapers up the stairs, what could he do but offer to carry them for her?

"Why, that's very sweet of you, Jack." She fell into step beside him. "It seemed like a good time to catch up on cutting some clippings Howard wants saved. And with George sulking around the offices, I thought I'd get more accomplished up in my room."

"Quite right," Jack replied with uncharacteristic brevity. And, for fear the forbidden subject would come bubbling out, he clamped his lips shut and spoke not another word till he'd deposited the papers in her room. Then, avoiding her quizzical look, he just said, "Well, don't work too hard," and beat a hasty retreat.

But his closest call came Sunday morning when Kevin suddenly announced he was going away for a few days.

"But you can't go now," Jack blurted. "You'll miss—" Then he caught himself and finished lamely, "That is—well—Howard's coming back tonight and—"

Kevin laughed sourly. "He won't want to see me. And I certainly don't want to see him."

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And away he went, leaving Jack to bemoan Kevin's perverse gift for being present or absent at exactly the wrong times. If the poor young fool had made himself scarce Saturday morning, he could have avoided a tongue lashing. Instead, off he drove now just in time to miss a chance to get a bit of his own back. Pity. But it only made Jack the more determined to be on hand for every minute of the fun and games.

To that end he was up with the birds on Monday. Dressed, shaved, mustache nattily trimmed, he was the first one into the dining room. Well, nearly the first. Kate had already been there, as he could tell by the neat stack of mail and the letter opener beside Howard's plate. Jack strolled casually past and lifted up the top letter. And there it was, right underneath, Betsy's little bombshell.

He moved quickly to his own place as Kate returned with George in tow. They both looked strained and barely responded to Jack's cheery greeting.

Howard, on the other hand, arrived in fine fettle. The fish had been biting well and he'd come back to find his goods and chattels safe, his castle secure.

"Morning, Kate . . . George," he said as he breezed in. "And Dapper Jack, by God, down on time for a change." He unfurled his napkin with a flourish and when the still frightened-looking Jeanie served breakfast, Howard praised everything as indiscriminately as he'd cursed it on Saturday.

"I do hope," George said stiffly, "this 'important matter' you wanted to see me about won't take long. I really must get back to Lois as soon as possible."

"No, no," Howard assured him jovially. "We'll get on to it right after we finish here. You can probably catch an afternoon plane."

Jack, meanwhile, was suffering agonies of impatience. He even began to worry that Howard might skip looking at his mail at the table this morning.

But at last Howard pushed away his plate and picked up the top letter. He slit it open, read it through, and put it aside. Then he reached for Betsy's letter and Jack, lest his eager expression betray him, lowered his eyes to his plate and waited breathlessly for Howard's rage to explode.

Nothing happened. There was not a sound until Kate asked anxiously, "Howard, is something wrong?" Jack looked up then and was stunned to see Howard staring at the letter in stricken disbelief, his ruddy face gone ashen.

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Jack was stung with remorse for having looked forward to this moment with such glee. He'd never dreamed Howard would take it this way. It was so unlike him.

Finally Howard raised his eyes from the letter. But instead of answering Kate, he ordered tersely, "Call Bea. Find out if Betsy's there. And Kate," he cautioned her, "make it casual. Don't alarm her."

Kate nodded and hastened off to do his bidding. George and Jack stole uneasy glances at one another, neither daring to break the tense silence while they waited. And after what seemed like hours, though it could only have been a few minutes, Kate came back to report exactly what Jack had known she would: "Betsy's not there. She called Bea on Friday to say she couldn't come this past weekend."

But if Jack had to feign surprise at that piece of news, he was thunderstruck when Howard sighed heavily and announced, "It's true then. Betsy's been kidnaped."

Amid the general expressions of alarm and dismay Jack sat stupefied. Had Howard lost his mind? How could he have read such a thing into. . . ? Jack reached over and picked up the letter from where it lay in front of Howard.

And shock upon shock, it wasn't Betsy's letter at all. Crudely printed, with key words underlined, it began: "*If you want to see your daughter alive again . . .*" Dazedly, Jack skimmed through the rest, his eye catching "*no police*" . . . "*unmarked bills*" . . . "*two suitcases*" . . . "*further instructions 9* P.M. *Monday*" . . . all the ugly phrases that, however hackneyed, never lose their power to turn a parent's blood to ice.

Jack closed his eyes for a moment and wondered if *he* had lost his mind. Then he roused himself and examined the envelope Howard had just opened. It was the same one Jack had seen before; there was that same little smudge in the corner. The sight of the envelope, addressed in Betsy's unmistakable round hand, considerably restored Jack's faith in his own senses.

"Howard!" He tugged at his brother's sleeve. "Howard, this is some kind of hoax. Look here—" He shoved the envelope under Howard's nose. "This was addressed by Betsy, don't you see? And it was Betsy herself who called Bea on Friday, so—"

"So?" Howard gave him a look of weary scorn. "With a gun pointed at her head she'd do anything they told her to."

And Jack suddenly realized how this must look to Howard. The

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fact that the note had come in an envelope addressed by Betsy was transparently fishy to Jack, but Howard took it as proof they really had her. After all, he hadn't seen Betsy's letter . . . Jack groaned. And where *was* Betsy's letter? Who . . . ? How. . . ? Why. . . ?

It was too much for him. His brain simply balked and went numb. He was dimly aware of activity beginning to stir around him, but in his bemused state the others appeared as actors on a stage.

There was good soldier Kate, awaiting orders; George likewise, all hopes of getting straight back to his Lois manfully renounced; and Howard, on his feet now, his color back, playing to the hilt the cool commander rising to the challenge. And clearly loving it, never mind the cause.

"Kate," he barked. "Have Arthur bring two of those suitcases from the luggage room. No. Best do it yourself. I don't want the servants to get wind of this."

"Right." Kate all but saluted and hurried out.

"Now, George," Howard said confidentially as he propelled him toward the door. "I'll call Ferguson and Brenner and Cahill and tell them I'm sending you to pick up unmarked cash I need for an off-the-record deal. They're good men. Discreet. They won't ask questions."

Almost dreamily, Jack watched them strut off to play their parts. As usual, he had been passed over—considered, if at all, too lightweight to be entrusted with even a walk-on.

The trouble was . . . With an effort Jack pulled himself out of his lethargy. The trouble was, he already had walked on, hadn't he? He'd read that letter of Betsy's. And much as he dreaded the prospect, he really must inform Howard of it before this thing went any further. Jack rose with a sigh and braced himself. It certainly wasn't the role he'd have chosen, but he'd better get it over with.

He marched resolutely to the west wing and caught up with the two of them in Kate's office. Howard was pulling a sheet of paper from the files.

Jack took a deep breath and said, "Howard, there's something I must tell you."

"Mmmm?" Howard barely looked up from his perusal of the paper. "What is it?"

"I—" Jack swallowed. It was bad enough to have to confess his shabby act to Howard. He certainly wasn't going to do it in front of George. "I'd like to speak to you in private," he said.

"Then it'll have to wait." Howard strode to the door of his own

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office and motioned George inside.

"But it won't take long—please—" Jack's voice rose maddeningly in pitch as it always did when he was trying to get Howard's attention. "You really ought to hear what I have to say. I think it could—"

"Oh, stop babbling, Jack. We have work to do."

"Howard!" Kate set the two suitcases down by the door and looked at her boss in mild reproof. "Jack is only trying to help," she reminded him. "He's naturally concerned about Betsy."

"Betsy? Oh—yes. Yes, I see. Well, I appreciate that, Jack." He put a kindly arm around Jack's shoulder and walked him across Kate's office. "And I tell you what. You can help. Just stay out of the way and let us get this show on the road. There's a good fellow."

And the next thing Jack knew he was standing outside the closed door of the west wing. He stared at it for a full minute. Then, cheeks blazing, head high, he turned on his heel and walked out. He went straight across the grounds to a wooded area and flung himself down on a tree stump.

It was a secluded spot he often came to, to lick his wounds, to regain his perspective. And gradually, as it worked its soothing magic, Jack's indignation gave way to a wry insouciance. Well, he'd tried. Nobody could say he hadn't. He shrugged. So let Howard get his "show on the road," and while he was charging off in the wrong direction, maybe Jack could figure out what was *really* going on here.

He drew his brows down in concentration. Now, what did he know for sure? He had read Betsy's letter. She had gone away on her own. And that ransom note was a fake . . . Instinctively, his stomach tightened at the recollection of those chilling words: "*If you want to see your daughter alive again . . .*" No. It was a fake, he repeated firmly, it must be. It had not been mailed, as it was intended to appear. It had been substituted for Betsy's letter in Betsy's envelope. And that—why that could only have been done by someone in this house!

(Continued on page 113)

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a *NEW* crime story by

CHRISTIANNA BRAND

Another of Christianna Brand's deceptively lighthearted crime stories—but behind the seemingly cheerful air there is the image of that heavily weighted silver candlestick—"so opportunely presented"—in an upraised hand over Edwin's head, and the fortune hunter waiting impatiently next door . . .

OVER MY DEAD BODY

by CHRISTIANNA BRAND

Locks clicked, bolts shot home as Mrs. Mort fortified her house in preparation for an afternoon's absence from it. At the gate her Eight Best Friends, in their little cavalcade of cars, impatiently hooted. "Let them wait," said Mrs. Mort to her Cousin Ada. "They can be gooping at George Halbert's, in hopes that he makes an appearance. Les Jalousies, I call them," said Mrs. Mort, who had Done French at her school in Littlehampton.

"A jalousie is a blind, dear," said Ada, who had Done French at a school in Paris.

"Oh, well, nobody could call *them* blind," said Mrs. Mort, opening the drawing-room door, peering in to make sure she was not closing in a nefarious person, before locking it. "I don't think I ever so much as speak to Mr. Halbert without their knowing of it."

"Oh, I think you sometimes do," said Ada, who was not blind either and indeed more than most qualified as a Jalousie, being a well-to-do widow while Lily Mort was simply a well-to-do wife. "Come on, Lily, do! You're obsessed with this burglar thing."

"Every other house has been broken into," said Lily. "But ours hasn't." The houses were on a private estate, dotted about among recently planted larch trees in a pretense of being "in the country," and from among her neighbors, faut de mieux, Lily had ac-

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quired her current batch of friends. She and her husband, Edwin, had come there through her Cousin Ada, already established as a resident. Ada had since regretted it, for George Halbert, for whom she had been setting her widow's cap, was now—at a distance of some five hundred yards—her Cousin Lily's immediate neighbor.

"Lily! At this rate we'll never get started."

"All right, all right," said Lily. She ushered Ada out through the front door, and standing on the step, went through a charade of conversing with somebody inside, and as they walked down the path to the gate, turned and waved back to an upstairs window. "Now anyone watching the house will think there's still someone at home," she said complacently to Ada.

Then for the benefit of Les Jalousies, she waved also to the windows of George Halbert's large mansion before joining them in a flurry of apologies. The Eight Best Friends pressed irritably on accelerators and confided among themselves that damn it all, Lily was a married woman, it was a rotten shame for her to be trying to monopolize George. Several of them were married women too, and until Lily came there, had themselves been busy trying to monopolize George.

And after all, Mrs. Mort had been right about the danger from burglars; for a couple of weeks later an intruder made his way into the house, crept up on her husband, Edwin, as he sat at his desk, flung over him a muffling woolen rug, and batted him heavily on the head with a weighted silver candlestick which his lady had only a few days earlier given him as an un-birthday present. The doctor's verdict had been laced with pessimism. From his bed, clad in a pair of striped pajamas, Edwin sent for his solicitor. "Sorry to bring you out, but I want to alter my will."

"Oh, Edwin," protested Mrs. Mort, all tears, "don't think of such things now! And you on your deathbed."

"What better time and place?" said Mr. Mort.

Mr. Tending, the solicitor, injected a hasty note of cheer. "Come, sir, we need not despair!"

"*You* needn't," said Mr. Mort. "I must. I'm the one who's going to die." He seemed quite resolved upon it. "Someone's seen to that."

"A monstrous attack! If Mrs. Mort hadn't appeared home at just that moment, things could have been even worse." Mr. Tending's voice faltered. Looked at from Mr. Mort's point of view, this might sound a trifle hollow. But Edwin was equal to it. "Yes, indeed.

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Something might have been stolen. And Mrs. Mort wouldn't have liked that, would she? Very fond of her property—or what will now be her property—is Mrs. Mort. Aren't you, Lily? Locks up the place like a fortress every time she goes out. So it's a funny thing, isn't it?"—he suggested to crocodile-weeping Lily—"that you should have gone and left that kitchen window open."

"Well, but you were in the house, Edwin, weren't you?"

"That's right, I was, wasn't I?" said Mr. Mort.

Mr. Tending delicately side-stepped this alarmingly full-frontal approach. "Nothing yet known of your assailant?"

"Well—let's say nothing known to the police."

"You say that as though—you don't know yourself who attacked you?" cried Mr. Tending, perhaps rather rashly.

"Not for certain," said Mr. Mort, "but I shall discover it."

"How can you discover it," cried Mrs. Mort, trembling, "lying helpless here?"

"It's when I'm lying helpless somewhere else that I shall discover it," said Mr. Mort. He added, apparently with deep satisfaction, "Beyond the grave."

"But by then it would be too late," faltered Mr. Tending.

"Don't you believe it!" said Mr. Mort.

The alteration to the will was, after all, no very great matter. Mrs. Mort would be an exceedingly wealthy widow. But on one condition.

"A condition, Edwin? You never made conditions before. You'll surely leave the house—"

"Yes, but *you* won't leave the house," interrupted Mr. Mort. "That's the new condition. The rest as before," he instructed Mr. Tending, "but the income ceases if she makes any move to leave this house."

"Well, but Edwin—why should I wish to leave the house?"

"To go to another house," said Mr. Mort. He moved his head with a small, probably painful, but significant gesture. "Like, for example, next door."

"Next door?"

"You don't think I don't know that before I'm lying cold in the grave," said Mr. Mort, apparently with relish at the prospect, "you'll be off up the aisle with that Halibut from next door."

"Halbert," said Mrs. Mort, automatically correcting him.

"A poor fish, either way," said Mr. Mort. "And he wants you for your money. Don't flatter yourself."

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Mrs. Mort shed more tears. "What a dreadful thing to say! How could he want me for my money? I haven't got any money."

"You will have now," said Mr. Mort. "Won't you?"

"But . . . He could have married for money any day. Ada would have had him, he could have married her any day."

"Yes, he could," said Mr. Mort. "Couldn't he?"

"And anyway," protested Lily hurriedly, "he doesn't need anyone else's money. He's a wealthy man. Look at his house!"

"You look at his house," said Mr. Mort. "But only from the windows of this one." And as to wealthy, he added, that was as might be. Playing the market, likely as not. Billingsgate Market, he added, rallying to the point of jocularity. "Fish market, see?" he explained to Mr. Tending. "Always call him Halibut, myself. But you're not having any fishy on *your* little dishy," he promised Mrs. Mort. "I'll see to that."

Mrs. Mort gave him back a stare that was in itself rather fishy. Her tears dried, she said quite nastily, "You think that if you force me to go on living here, you'll prevent me from remarrying. But after all, Mr. Hal—well, any gentleman—might be quite happy simply to move in with *me*."

"Over my dead body," said Mr. Mort.

In the meantime, however, he busied himself with the business of his will and, having completed it, turned up his toes and died. The Eight Best Friends showed some lack of originality as to the shape of their floral tributes and he was laid to rest in a positive snowstorm of lilies.

They returned to the house with the widow, helped undo the locks and bolts applied for the duration of her enforced excursion, and, over the funeral baked meats, expressed tremulous longings for some trifle to remember dear Edwin by—though no one seemed interested in the heavy silver candlestick now home from its sojourn with the police and back on the late Edwin's desk, where it had made so brief and unfortunate an appearance.

But Mrs. Mort felt that Edwin would have wished everything to remain in her possession and the Eight Best Friends retired—not profoundly disappointed, for expectations of Lily's generosity had not been high—and fell to a happy gabble of gossip about her. Had anyone *seen* the exchange of glances, right there over poor Edwin's coffin?

"At least he didn't actually escort her to the funeral," said Best Friend Mavis.

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"My dear, even she wouldn't have had the face for that."

"Well, *I* wasn't going to offer," said Cousin Ada. "Let her come on her own."

"She must have felt a bit awful—locking up the place, creeping out all alone—"

"This time I daresay she remembered to lock the kitchen window."

"Well, but that other time Mr. Mort *was* in the house," said Mavis.

"Yes, he was, wasn't he?" said Best Friend Alice, as Mr. Mort had said before her.

"Alice, you're not suggesting—"

"A bash on the head, Lily's a widow, nothing stolen—"

"Because Lily got back just in time."

"To prevent any theft. So what *I'd* like to know—" said Alice in the accents of Miss Dolittle—

"What—should—have—come—to—me," finished Cousin Ada.

"Well, but Ada, there was nothing actually that should have come to you?"

"George Halbert should have come to me," said Ada. "But he won't now. She'll have him now."

"George Halbert is just a flirt, Ada, dear—we all know that. A heartless flirt."

"He is also a penniless flirt," said Ada, "and sooner or later he was going to marry the one of us that was available and had the most money. Well, I was available and had the most money. But now Lily is available and has even more."

"Oh, Ada, he's rolling!"

"He's rolled," said Ada. Now that all was lost, why keep up any more pretenses? Better retain the allegiance of the Eight Best Friends, which she had been in danger of losing—though well lost if the alternative had been losing George, fortune hunter or no. "His late wife's money all gambled away. *I* knew that—and Lily knew it too because, fool that I was, I told her. Of course he was safe enough from her—as long as Edwin was alive."

"That's *right,*" said the friends, their faces growing a little green at thought of that heavy candlestick—so opportunely presented—in an upraised hand.

George Halbert had no such misgivings. It had been a near thing—Lily Mort was a splendid lady, he'd been getting a mite too fond of her, and his proposal to rich but dull Ada had, consid-

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ering his financial situation, been long overdue. But now this heaven-sent burglar had come along in the nick of time and bonked old Mort over the head. George couldn't have made a neater job of it if he'd done it himself. And not even anything stolen. Now that all that had been Edwin's would be Lily's, and all that was Lily's would soon be his own—it would have been a pity if anything of value had been taken.

Except that . . . He hoped uneasily that she was not going to become too securely attached to her property. Heaven knew, she'd been bad enough before, with her locks and bolts and pretended conversations at the door, but now she refused to leave the house at all. After Edwin's dreadful experience, she said, she hardly dared to go out.

But Edwin had been *in*, George pointed out.

Not that they were ready as yet to appear together in public. Decency forbade. Telephone calls did very well meanwhile—increasingly overt in expression of their mutual understanding. She suggested that, very discreetly, he should set about selling his house, and as time went by she allowed him secret evening visits, sneaking through the larches to her darkened windows.

And the agoraphobia grew and with it an almost morbid depression within herself, though outwardly she was all ardor. "You'll have to come out on Tuesday," he said at last. "I've arranged things with the Registrar, it's all settled." That would fetch her! She'd been chivvying him along to get on with the marriage.

She prepared no reception for after the ceremony, bought no new dress. A day or two later she explained her arrangements to George. "You drive on down and I'll meet you there."

He could hardly, as the friends had suggested, have escorted her to her husband's funeral, but this was ridiculous. "Nonsense! I'll call for you and we'll drive there together."

"The bridegroom never—"

He dismissed silly superstition. "I'm not letting you drive down all alone. I'll call for you about ten."

"No, please don't. Ada will come with me."

George doubted it. He'd been having a rather rough time since his engagement, with his erstwhile lady loves. And he was right. Ada wasn't having any. Let Lily get on with it, she said to George and added darkly that Lily had managed very well up to now, all on her own, hadn't she?

Nor were the others of the Eight Best Friends any more forth-

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coming. He approached them in a pecking order but each rattled her feathers at him and said thank you, no; dear Lily, they suggested, as Ada had, and with the same odd undertone, vaguely threatening, had so far proved quite capable of arranging matters to her own advantage. Let her continue to do so. *If* Edwin would let her.

"Edwin? What's Edwin got to do with it? He couldn't stop her marrying me. He's dead."

"That's right. And she'll marry you. But—over his dead body."

" 'Over my dead body will any gentleman move into this house,' that's what Edwin said," Lily told Ada.

Silly women! He repeated none of it to Lily, pretended to believe she'd fixed up with a bridesmaid, and on the intended day presented himself at her door with a large bouquet of lilies of the valley. A bit tactless when one recollected the funeral of departed Edwin, but George was not a man of exquisite sensitivities.

His feelings were affronted nevertheless by her blank repudiation. "Please go away, George! I *asked* you not to come. I'm going on my own."

"But it's ridiculous to take two cars. Besides, all by yourself—"

"I'll manage." She said, almost savagely, "I've managed pretty well so far, haven't I?"

Did George perceive then, just the faintest, faintest glimmering of the raised candlestick? Things those girls had hinted at . . . ? His face grew dark. "If you don't want to go through with it—"

"Oh, George!" Sick despair entered her sick, despairing soul. To have got him so far! Fighting Edwin all the way—to have got him to the very steps of the registry office, and now— "Yes, of course I want to go through with it, I never wanted anything more in my life. But I'm not coming out of this house with you—I'm coming on my own." She pleaded, "Let me have my own way—just for the last time!" After that, at least she would have got him, and then things must take care of themselves. "George—please!"

But he would have none of it. He picked up her handbag from a chair in the hall, thrust it over her arm, caught her by the wrist, and dragged her forth, just clicking-to the lock of the door. But halfway down the path to the gate he paused, turned, and gave a cheerful wave toward an upstairs window. "Now they'll think there's someone at home," he said.

And the curtains parted. George caught a glimpse of a striped pajama sleeve—and a hand waved back.

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a *NEW* Black Widowers story by

ISAAC ASIMOV

The lawyer cometh—an attorney named Matthew Parris insists on visiting the Black Widowers monthly banquet on "professional" business, and brings with him perhaps the cleverest of these postprandial problems. A baffling tale about a contemporary Apple of Discord in the form of a riddle-will . . .

TO THE BAREST

by ISAAC ASIMOV

Emmanuel Rubin said in a scandalized whisper, "He offered to *pay* for his dinner." He glanced with owlish ferocity at the guest who was attending this month's banquet of the Black Widowers.

"Yes, he did," said Mario Gonzalo casually.

"And I suppose you accepted," said Rubin.

"No, I didn't, though I don't see why he shouldn't pay if he wants to. If someone is anxious to pay for the privilege of dining with us, why not let him?"

"Because we would be selling our freedom of choice, that's why, and that freedom is without price to the rest of us. Do you think I'm willing to eat with anyone who'll pick up my check? I *choose* my companions. Damn it, Mario, if he offered to buy us, that in itself should instantly disqualify him as a guest."

"Well, it doesn't, so why not calm down, Manny, and listen? I've told the others already and saved you for last because I knew you'd rant and rave. He got in touch with me—"

"Do you know him?"

"No, but he introduced himself. He's Matthew Parris and he's a lawyer. He knew of the Black Widowers. He knew I was to be the next host and he wanted to see us professionally, *all* of us. He asked

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to join us at our banquet and offered to pay if that would help. He seemed like an interesting guy, so why not?"

Rubin said discontentedly, "Why should professional matters intrude on the banquet? What does he want to do, serve us with summonses?"

"No," said Gonzalo with an affectation of eye-rolling impatience. "He represents Ralph Ottur. We still send Ralph invitations and that's how Parris knew I was the next host. He got in touch with me at Ralph's instructions. --I suppose you remember Ralph."

Rubin's eyes flashed behind his thick-lensed glasses. "Of course I remember him. But I'm surprised you do. I didn't know you had become a member before he left."

"Memory decays with age, Manny."

Rubin ignored that. "That was twelve, fifteen years ago when he left us, when the Black Widowers were just beginning. That was before we began to meet here at the Milano—before Henry's time." He looked in Henry's direction with a smile and said, "It doesn't seem possible we could have had meetings of the Black Widowers without Henry. But then, in those days, we wouldn't have believed it possible to have dinners without Ralph. It was in '65 he went to California, wasn't it? We were kids then."

"I believe," said Geoffrey Avalon, who had drifted toward them, his neatly bearded face solemn, "that you and I, Manny, were fortyish even then. Scarcely kids, I'd say."

"Oh, well," Rubin said. "What does Ralph want with us, Mario?"

"I don't know," said Gonzalo. "Parris wouldn't say. Have you heard from Ralph lately?"

"Not a word in years. He doesn't even send in a refusal card to the monthly invitations. Have you heard from him, Jeff?"

"No," said Avalon. "Tom Trumbull says Ralph is teaching navigation at C.I.T. but has had no personal communication."

"Well, then, Jeff, what do we do about this lawyer Mario has dragged in?"

"Treat him like any other guest. What else can we do?"

Henry approached, his smooth and unwrinkled face radiating the efficiency that was characteristic of this best of waiters. He said, "Mr. Gonzalo, we are ready to begin dinner if you will be so kind as to call the meeting to order."

The dinner was quieter than usual as Matthew Parris somehow absorbed the attention of the others. He seemed oblivious of that,

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however, his smooth-shaven face shining pinkly, his graying hair slicked smoothly back, his smile wide and unaffected, his speech precise and with a flat Middle Western accent.

At no time did he refer to the business at hand, but confined himself to discussing the Middle Eastern situation. The trouble, he said, was that both sides were playing for time. He thought the Arabs felt that as oil supplies dwindled, world hunger for energy would bring them victory, and that Israel felt, as oil supplies dwindled, the Arab influence would dwindle.

To which James Drake said somberly that as oil supplies dwindled, he was afraid civilization might break down and the whole matter of victory (quote, unquote, he said) in the Middle East or anywhere else would be irrelevant.

"Ah," said Parris, "but your fiery ideologue doesn't care about trivial things such as survival. He would rather win in Hell than lose in Heaven."

Mario Gonzalo, who had put aside his rather blinding pea-green jacket and was eating veal cordon bleu in his striped shirtsleeves, leaned toward Thomas Trumbull and whispered, "This whole thing may be a practical joke, Tom. I met Ralph only two or three times before he left. He was a peculiar fellow, as I recall."

Trumbull's bronzed forehead furrowed under his white thatch of hair. "So are we all, I hope. Ralph Ottur founded this club. We used to eat at his house during the first couple of years. He was a widower, a gourmet cook, an astronomer, and a word buff."

"That's what I remember—the word-buff bit."

"Yes," said Trumbull. "He's written books on acrostics and on novelty verse of all kinds. Conundrums involving word play and puns were his specialty. He's the one who got Roger Halsted interested in limericks."

Gonzalo laughed. "How did you stand it, Tom?"

Trumbull shrugged. "It wasn't the sole topic of conversation and I was younger then. However, as you probably remember, Ralph remarried, went to the west coast, and we never heard from him again. Then Jim Drake and I found the Milano and the Black Widowers have been here ever since, better than ever."

Henry refilled the coffee cups and Gonzalo played a melodious tattoo on his water glass with his spoon.

"Jim," he said, "as the oldest member and the one who best knew Ralph Ottur in the old days when even Manny claims to have been

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a kid, would you do the grilling honors?"

James Drake lit a fresh cigarette and said, "Mr. Parris, how do you justify your existence?"

"At the moment," said Parris, "by attempting to make you somewhat richer than you have been hitherto. Or if not you, Dr. Drake, then another one of you."

"Don't you know which?"

"I'm afraid not, gentlemen. In order to know, I must complete the reading of the will."

"Will? What will?" Drake took the cigarette from his mouth, placed it in an ashtray, and looked uneasy.

A heavy silence descended on the rest of the table. Henry, who had been serving brandy, desisted.

Parris said seriously, "I was instructed to say nothing concerning the matter till I was a guest at a Black Widowers banquet and till I was being grilled. Not till this moment."

Drake said, "It *is* this moment. Go on."

Parris said, "I'm sorry to have to tell you that Mr. Ralph Ottur died last month. He had been pretty much of a recluse since his second wife died three years ago and, at his request, no announcement of his death was made. Though he had made a clean break with his life in New York after he left for California, he did not, apparently, forget his old friends, the Black Widowers. He asked that I hand out one of these to each of you, provided all six were present, and you all are."

An envelope was passed to each of the stunned Black Widowers. Each envelope bore the name of a Black Widower in careful India-ink lettering.

Drake muttered, "There's his insignia." Each envelope bore a stylized sketch of what was unmistakably an otter with a fish in its mouth.

Trumbull said, "Did we each get the same?"

Gonzalo said, "Read it and we'll see."

Trumbull hesitated, then opened his envelope and read the note inside in a low monotone. " 'Well, don't sit there like idiots. There's no reason to get into a mood. Remember, "mood" spelled backward is "doom." I've been with you in spirit every month since I left, even if you haven't heard from me, and I'm with you again now, ready for our last game.' "

"That's what mine says," said Gonzalo.

There was a murmur of agreement from the rest.

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"Well, then," said Parris briskly. "I'll now read the will—not the entire will, you understand, but only that portion which applies to the club. If you're ready—"

There was silence and Parris read, " 'It is my further wish and desire to make a bequest to the Black Widowers, a club I founded, and for the members of which I have always had a profound affection. Therefore, I wish to leave a sum of money, which, after taxes are paid, is to come to ten thousand dollars. This sum is to go to one of the following gentlemen, all of whom were members of the club at the last meeting I attended, and all of whom, I believe, are still alive. They are Thomas Trumbull, James Drake, Emmanuel Rubin, Geoffrey Avalon, Roger Halsted, and Mario Gonzalo.' "

Parris looked up and said, "For the record, there are six of you at the table and I believe you are the six whose names I have just read off. Are there any discrepancies?"

Gonzalo said, "There is a seventh member. Henry, our waiter, is the noblest Black Widower of us all."

Halsted said, "He wasn't a member in Ralph's day.—Hell, I can't believe he's dead. Do you remember that time he asked us to find a common English word that contained the letters UFA in that consecutive order. It kept us quiet all that evening."

"Yes," said Drake, "and it was you who got it—manUFActure. That's why you remember."

Rubin said, "*Quiet*!" His straggly beard bristled. "I demand silence. The will hasn't been read yet. What does Ralph mean that *one* of us will get the money? Why only one, and which one?"

Parris cleared his throat. "I don't know. It is at this point I have been instructed to open a small envelope labeled: *One*. Here it is."

"Well, don't open it just yet," said Rubin. "Mario, you're the host, but listen to me. If a bequest were left to the club or to the six of us in equal division, that would be all right. To leave it to only one of us, however, would create hard feelings. Let's agree, then, that whoever gets the money sets up a fund for the use of the Black Widowers as an entity."

Gonzalo said, "I'm willing. Any arguments?"

There were none, and Gonzalo said, "Open the envelope, Mr. Parris."

Parris opened it, withdrew a three-by-five card, glanced at it, looked surprised, and said, "It says: 'To the barest.' "

"What?" said Trumbull.

Parris looked at the other side, shook his head, and said, "That's

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all it says. See for yourselves." The card was passed around.

Avalon chuckled and said, "Don't you get it? He said in his note there would be a last game and this is it."

"What kind of game?" said Gonzalo.

Rubin snorted and said, "Not one of his good ones. Go ahead and explain, Jeff."

Avalon looked solemn and said, "In the Greek myths the sea nymph, Thetis, married the mortal, Peleus, and all the gods and goddesses were invited to the wedding. The goddess of discord, Eris, was overlooked. Furious, she appeared unbidden and tossed a golden apple into the happy throng, then left. Hermes picked up the apple and noticed a small message attached. What it said was: *To the Fairest*. Three goddesses at once reached for it—Hera, the queen of heaven; Athena, the goddess of wisdom; and Aphrodite, the goddess of love and beauty. The quarrel that resulted ended in the Trojan War."

"Exactly," said Rubin, "and I suggest we not play Ralph's game. I don't know what the hell he means by the barest, but if we start arguing about which one of us qualifies for the ten thousand dollars we will end up with every one of us aggrieved, winner and losers alike, even if we put the money into a fund. Earlier, Mr. Parris said that ideologues valued victory above survival. Well, I don't. I don't want to see the Black Widowers broken up over the question of who wins ten thousand dollars."

"Hear, hear," said Gonzalo. "Even you say something sensible now and then, Manny. Let's agree that each one of us is in a six-way tie for barest, take the money, and put it into the fund."

"Excellent," said Avalon. "I don't see that there would be any objection to that."

Again there was a silence, but Parris said, "I'm afraid my instructions were to allow discussion and then to open another small envelope marked: *Two*."

Gonzalo looked surprised and said, "Well, open it."

Parris opened the second envelope, removed a folded piece of paper, and unfolded it to find a single-spaced typewritten message. He glanced over it and chuckled.

He said, "Here is what it says: 'I have no doubt that Jeff Avalon, in his endearingly pedantic way, will have by now explained the connection of the message with the Apple of Discord at the wedding of Thetis and Peleus—' "

Avalon, having flushed to his hairline, said stiffly, "I have never

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denied that I have a touch of pedantry about me. I trust that I have never been offensively so, or if I have, that I may count on my outspoken comrades of the Black Widowers to tell me so."

"Don't get defensive, Jeff," said Trumbull. "We're all pedants. Go on, Mr. Parris."

Parris nodded and said, " '—of Thetis and Peleus. It may also be that someone, possibly Manny Rubin, will suggest that the game be refused and that the money be shared. Not so! Sorry to insist, but only one person gets the money and that person will be he who can demonstrate himself to be the barest to the satisfaction of Matthew Parris, the executor of the will. Failing that, no one of them will get the money. I daresay Jeff can explain the appropriateness of this, if he has not already done so.' "

Avalon cleared his throat and looked harassed. "I don't think it's necessary that I do so."

Rubin said, "It's all right, Jeff. I'll take over. Everyone knows *I'm* no pedant."

"Not bright enough," muttered Gonzalo.

Rubin, glaring briefly at Gonzalo, said, "As Jeff said, three goddesses claimed that apple. Hermes, who had picked it up, could see at once that this was no place for an innocent god, and he absolutely declined to make a decision. One by one the other gods also declined. After considerable discussion, someone suggested that some poor mortal be stuck with the task. The one selected was a shepherd boy on the slopes of Mt. Ida near Troy.

"The three goddesses appeared to him in all their magnificence and each, fearing she might not win in a fair contest, attempted to bribe the judge. Hera offered him world conquest; Athena offered him the crown of wisdom; and Aphrodite offered him the most beautiful girl in the world as his wife.

"The shepherd boy was young enough to find the third bribe the most attractive, and chose Aphrodite. Undoubtedly, she would have won in a fair contest of fairness, but it was a disastrous choice just the same. The most beautiful girl in the world was Helen, queen of Sparta, and the shepherd boy some years later carried her off with Aphrodite's help, and that started the Trojan War.

"The shepherd boy's name was Paris and he was one of the fifty sons of Priam, king of Troy. The decision among the goddesses is a favorite scene among artists and is commonly referred to as *The Judgment of Paris*. Clearly, Ralph couldn't resist playing on words and setting up *The Judgment of Parris*—two r's."

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Parris smiled and said, "I seem to have the worst of it. Instead of choosing among three glorious goddesses, I am faced with deciding among six not particularly attractive men."

Rubin said, "You're not faced with any decision at all, actually. Ralph can't *make* us play the game. If the only way we can get the ten thousand dollars is to compete for it, then I suggest we let the whole thing go. Ten thousand dollars is something we can live without—we have lived without it all these years. What we can't live without is our mutual friendship."

Halsted looked regretful. "Well, now, we can use the money. It could defray the costs of the banquets. What with inflation, I, for one, am finding it difficult to cover my expenses. Since I'm the most nearly bald member of the group, can't we say I'm obviously the barest and let it go at that?"

Gonzalo said, "We could decide that 'barest' means 'the most nearly nude.' Then I can strip to my underwear, collect, and we'll set up the fund."

"Oh, God," said Rubin. "Look, I'd pay you ten thousand dollars, if I had it to spare, *not* to strip."

Drake said dreamily, "If we were ecdysiasts, it would all be simple. A nice six-way tie."

Parris said, "Now, gentlemen, wait. This is serious. I disapprove of wills such as this one, but I am the executor and I must treat it seriously. I don't know what Mr. Ottur means by the 'barest,' but it is undoubtedly something that, first, is not obvious, and second, is compelling. If one of you can demonstrate what is meant by 'barest' and then show convincingly that one of you is the 'barest,' I will release the money. Otherwise I can't. Baldness and, for that matter, nudity, do not strike me as clever explanations of the meaning of the phrase. Try again."

"No, we won't," said Rubin. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Roger, for that baldness suggestion. If you need money that much, I'll contribute to the cost when it's your turn to host."

Halsted turned red and pointed an angry finger at Rubin, "I don't need money that much, and I wouldn't come to you for help if I were starving."

Avalon said, "Well, the Apple of Discord is beginning to do its dirty work, obviously. Manny is right. Let's let the money go, while we're still on speaking terms."

Halsted frowned as he passed the palm of his hand over his high forehead, but he kept quiet.

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Rubin muttered, "Sorry, Rog. I meant no offense."

Halsted waved a briefly forgiving hand.

Parris said, with considerably more than a trace of apology, "My instructions are that after you have had time for discussion, I am to open the small envelope marked: *Three*."

Drake said softly, "How many envelopes do you have, Mr. Parris? This can go on all night."

"This is the last envelope," said Parris.

"Don't open it," roared Rubin. "There's nothing it can say that will change our minds."

Parris said, "I am compelled to open and read this third message by the ethics of my profession. I can't compel you to listen, of course, so if any of you wish to leave the room, you may."

No one left, not even Rubin.

Parris opened the third envelope, and this time he looked grim as he scanned the message.

"I think you had better listen," he said. "The message reads: 'I think it possible that the group may decide to turn down the bequest rather than play the game. If they do so, or if they play but do not solve the riddle, I do will and bequeath the money, unconditionally, to the American Nazi Party.' "

There was a unanimous rumble from the Black Widowers.

Parris nodded. "That's what it says. See for yourselves."

"You can't do that," said Halsted.

"I am legally compelled to do so," said Parris, "if you refuse to play the game. I am just a sluice through which the money passes. I cannot take independent action. Of course, any or all of you may contest the will, but I don't see what grounds you can possibly have—what legal grounds, that is. A man can do as he wishes with his property within certain clearly defined legal limits, and those limits don't seem to be transgressed here."

"Then let's play the game," said Halsted. "I say I'm the barest because I'm the baldest. I don't say that to win the money, Manny; I say it to keep the money out of the hands of the Nazis. Now if you'll agree to that, Mr. Parris, you can hand over the money, and we'll put it into the fund, and that's that."

Parris hesitated. "I'd like to. I would really like to. The trouble is I can't."

"Why not? Do you *want* the money to go to the Nazis?"

"Of course not," said Parris indignantly, "but my only duty here is to respect the will of my client and he wants one of you to dem-

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onstrate that he is the barest in so clever and unmistakable a way that I will be compelled to accept it and select that one as the winner. After that, the money is the property of the winner and he is free to do with it as he wishes—keep it, divide it equally among the six of you, set up a trust fund for whatever legal purpose, or anything else."

"Are you sure?" said Trumbull. "No more clever little notes?"

"No more," said Parris. "The reading is complete. I must remind you now that it's a case of the Judgment of Parris. You have to convince me of the validity of the solution or I have to give the money to—to—I would have no choice."

Gonzalo said, "According to Manny, Paris—the original Paris—was bribed into giving his judgment. Does that mean—"

Parris said seriously, "Please don't finish that remark, Mr. Gonzalo. It will not be funny."

Rubin said, "Then we have no choice. We have to play the game. Who's the barest?"

Halsted said, "We can't answer that until we find out what the old b—— well, *nil nisi bonum* and all that. What does Ralph mean by 'barest,' if he doesn't mean baldest?"

"He may mean 'poorest,' the person who is barest of money," said Gonzalo. "I think I'm in the running for that."

"Or shortest," said Avalon, "the one who most nearly barely exists, so to speak. That's you, Manny."

"You may have eight inches on me, Jeff," said Rubin, "but that could be eight inches of solid bone. How about the one with the smallest wardrobe, which eliminates Mario, or else the lowest IQ, which puts him right back into the running again."

"Gentlemen, gentlemen," interposed Parris, "none of this sounds in the least persuasive. Please be serious."

"You're right," said Rubin, "this is too serious a matter for fooling, but I hate this thing too much to be able to think clearly about it. I say we get Henry into it right now."

Henry, who had been standing at the sideboard and listening attentively, now shook his head, "I'm sorry, gentlemen, but that would not be fitting. The deceased did not know of me, did not consider me a member of the club, and I do not qualify to play the game."

"You're a member now," said Trumbull gruffly. "You may not qualify to inherit the money, but you qualify to advise us as to who may. Go on and tell us, Henry."

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Henry said, "I don't think I can, Mr. Trumbull. If I am a member of the Black Widowers, I am the only member who has never met Mr. Ottur. I do not know the cast of his thought."

Trumbull said, "There's no mystery there. You've heard us discussing him. He was a word-nut. Come on, Henry, if you didn't know Ralph, neither did he know you. He didn't know your faculty for seeing the simple things."

Henry sighed. "I will do my best, sir. May I ask some questions? For instance, am I correct in taking it for granted that the deceased was not a Nazi sympathizer."

"He sure wasn't," said Rubin with a snort. "During the 1950s he was in trouble because some people thought his views were too leftist."

"Then he doesn't want the money to be left to the Nazis?"

"Of course not."

"So he expects you to win."

Avalon said, "He expects us to do so, but he may have overestimated our abilities."

Henry said, "Do you suppose his eagerness to have you win would extend to his giving you a hint?"

Gonzalo said, "What kind of hint?"

"I'm not sure, Mr. Gonzalo, but let us see. Is Mr. Ottur's name spelled in the usual way?"

"You mean like the animal?" said Trumbull. "O-T-T-E-R? No. It's spelled O-T-T-U-R. With a U."

Henry said, "I believe that when the preliminary envelopes were handed out, Dr. Drake said something about Mr. Ottur's personal insignia."

Drake said, "I meant this sketch on the envelope."

"Yes. I had thought that might possibly be so. Has he always used that insignia, Dr. Drake?"

"As long as I've known him, and that goes back a long time."

Henry said, "I can understand the otter, which is a clear reference to Mr. Ottur's name, in a punning sort of way. May I ask if it is known whether the fish in the otter's mouth is a trout?"

There was no reply at first, but finally Avalon said, "I never gave that any thought. It could be a trout, I suppose. Why do you ask?"

"Only because trout—T-R-O-U-T—is an anagram of Ottur, O-T-T-U-R. An otter holding a trout is a double reference to his last name by way of a pun and an anagram. Does that fit his character?"

"Absolutely," said Rubin. "The otter was obvious to all of us but

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I never thought of the trout. He never explained that, as far as I can recall, but then he never explained anything. He wanted everything worked out. But what does all this have to do with the problem facing us, Henry?"

"It seemed to me, gentlemen, that the preliminary message was not really a necessary prelude to the will and might well have been omitted. Furthermore, I saw no point in giving each one of you an identical message. A single message read out loud would have sufficed, as in the case of the three messages in the three envelopes that were part of the will.

"Looking at it in that fashion," Henry went on, "it occurs to me that he was really handing out his insignia to make sure each one of you got a good look at it, and will therefore perhaps think of using it as a clue to the nature of the game. The insignia is a pun and anagram on Mr. Ottur's last name. The solution to the problem facing us may rest in just that—puns and anagrams on last names."

The six Black Widowers looked thoughtful at that, each in his own way, and finally Drake stirred.

He said, "You know, that sounds like Ralph, and if so, let me point out that D-R-A-K-E can be rearranged into R-A-K-E-D, and a piece of ground that has been raked is bare, to say nothing of the fact that it is only one letter removed from N-A-K-E-D, which is certainly barest."

Parris said, " 'Raked' doesn't sound compelling to me, and 'naked' is completely impermissible. I don't think we should be allowed to substitute letters."

Rubin said, "Let me offer a pun, then. We don't have to rearrange the letters R-U-B-I-N. Just change it into two words, R-U-B I-N, 'rub in.' Cold cream, which is rubbed into the skin appears to vanish and leave the skin bare. How about that?"

"Even more far-fetched than 'raked,' " said Parris.

Gonzalo said, "G-O-N-Z-A-L-O can be rearranged to A Z-O L-O-N-G, which is 'a so long' in a German accent. A goodbye, in other words, and when everyone says goodbye you're left bare of company."

"Good God!" said Rubin.

"I can't think of anything else," said Gonzalo defensively.

"If we're going to misspell," said Halsted, "my name can be rearranged into S-T-E-A-L-D-H, which is a misspelling of 'stealth,' and if people steal away, the place is left bare."

"Worse and worse," said Rubin.

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"I'm worst of all," said Trumbull, scowling. "The only vowels in my name are two U's and I can't do anything with that."

Parris said impatiently, "You are still not being serious, gentlemen. None of this is worth anything at all. Please! If you want to keep the money from falling into the wrong hands, you *must* do better."

Avalon, who had had a tight smile on his face for the preceding few minutes, now hunched his magnificent eyebrows down over his eyes and let out a satanic cackle.

"But I have it, gentlemen, and I'm delighted to be able to say that Henry, our unexcelled waiter, has overlooked the key clue. No matter, Henry. Even Homer nods."

"Far less often than I do, Mr. Avalon. What clue did I overlook, sir?"

"Why, in the preliminary message, there is not only the insignia, as you correctly pointed out, Henry, but also a reference to the fact that M-O-O-D spelled backward is D-O-O-M. That statement is rather a non sequitur and we have a right to wonder why it was brought in at all."

"Because that's the way Ralph thinks—I mean thought," said Drake.

"Undoubtedly, but if you will take the trouble to spell Avalon backward, you have N-O L-A-V-A. No puns, no rearrangements, just do as Ralph did in the message."

Parris clenched both hands in excitement. "Now that's the most interesting thing I've heard yet. But why 'no lava?' "

Avalon said, "A piece of ground over which lava has not flowed is bare."

Parris considered this and shook his head. "We might just as easily consider that ground over which lava has not flowed is rich in vegetation and is *not* bare. In that sense, it would be land over which lava *has* flowed that would be bare."

Avalon said, "Very well, then, we can rearrange the letters slightly and we have O-N L-A-V-A. By Counsellor Parris' argument there would be no vegetation on lava and that anagram represents bareness."

"What about the reversed lettering," said Gonzalo. "Mood to doom and all that."

"Well," said Avalon, "we'll have to eliminate that."

Parris said, "I liked 'no lava' but it was not convincing. The reason I liked it, though, was that the backward spelling did seem to be a

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reasonable solution. 'On lava' without the backward spelling does not have enough to recommend it."

There was a moment of silence and Rubin said, "You know, this is getting less funny all the time. Are we going to end up giving the money to the Nazis, even with Henry's help?"

Gonzalo said, "Well, let's ask him. What are we doing wrong, Henry?"

Henry said, "I'm not sure, Mr. Gonzalo. It does occur to me, though, that so far we have been punning and anagramming our last names. Ought we to be working with the question as well?"

"I don't see what you mean, Henry?" said Avalon.

"It strikes me, Mr. Avalon, that the phrase, 'To the barest' might just possibly be punned into 'To the bearest'—that is, B-E-A-R-E-S-T—that is, the Black Widower most like a bear."

Trumbull said, "Terrible! It's a terrible pun and it's a terrible suggestion. I don't see how we can get any one of us to be clearly most like a bear any more than we can get anyone most bare."

Gonzalo said, "I don't know, Tom. You've got a terrible temper. You're the most bearish."

"Not while Manny is alive," said Trumbull hotly.

"I've never lost my temper in my life, damn it," shouted Rubin, just as hotly.

"Yes, like now," said Halsted.

Parris said, "Gentlemen, this is getting us nowhere either. Unless someone can think of something, we'll have to give up."

Henry said, "But we now have our solution, to my way of thinking, Mr. Parris. If we take the challenge to be that of finding the Black Widower most like a bear, may I point out that if we change the position of but one letter in R-U-B-I-N, we get B-R-U-I-N, the common name for the bear in the medieval animal-epics, and still used today. I believe there is a football team known as the 'Bruins.' "

Parris said energetically, "I'll buy that. It is a clear solution that fits, and it's unique."

The Black Widowers broke into applause and Henry turned pink.

Rubin said, "Since the money is mine, then, I will set up the trust fund with directions that the earned interest be turned over to Henry as an honorarium for his services to the club."

There was applause again.

Henry said, "Gentlemen, please don't. I will be overpaid."

"Come, come, Henry," said Rubin. "Are you refusing?"

Henry considered, sighed, then said, "I accept, sir, with thanks."

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A vividly evocative story with the taste, feel, smell, and sight of nature—and of human nature . . .

NIGHTCRAWLERS

by CAROL CAIL

On bare hands and padded knees, Denny Westfall inspected the spot. To the southeast, Fort Wayne stained the overcast night sky. Frogs talked to the slapping lake, 50 yards northwest. Rumblings of a freight faded in and out on an unsteady wind. Just beyond the reach of Denny's light Mutt snuffled on a rabbit scent.

Denny grunted, stood, tilted his headlamp starward, and reached for the tools strung along his belt. First the metal tent-stake slipped into his fingers, the familiar balanced weight against his palm. Next came the hammer with its inner tubing cap stretched taut across the polished head.

He inserted the stake an inch into the yielding soil. Poking two fingers into the breast pocket of his denim vest, he opened the sawdust pouch and extracted a pinch for dusting both hands.

Left side, right side, he gently struck the stake. The rhythmic metallic beat sent vibrations echoing from barn walls a mile away. The humming drilled into the ground.

Denny sank the hammer into its holster and aimed the light toward his feet.

Squirming, twisting, turning, they came. The monster worms struggled from their dens, nightblind, to the harvest. Denny scooped them up two-handed, seizing each one by the tail before it could reverse into the dirt.

The cut-off plastic bleach bottle gradually filled with nightcrawlers. When his hands became slippery from slime, Denny used the sawdust pouch. When the ground stopped moving, Denny twisted up the stake, whistled for Mutt, and made for the invisible house, more than a mile across weed-infested fields.

The night had been only fair. He had maybe 500 nightcrawlers, less than one-third his usual catch.

He killed the headlamp half a mile from home, blindman-sure of every step. Sticktights crunched beneath his boots. Crickets

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chanted. Far off a semi changed gears. Closer, a car motor started, idled, and faded off toward the crossroads.

In the house, the bathroom light flared. Denny kept walking, slower. He looked at the numbers 1:55 on his wristwatch.

He tried to pass the barn without hearing. It had leaned on the northwest winds all winter, and when they stopped for May, the gray boards oozed into the barnyard. The sighing, groaning timber depressed Denny with memories of his father.

Denny crossed the buckled porch, opened the unlocked door, and entered the kitchen. He used his headlamp while he loaded the new crop into the refrigerated dirt box. He washed at the kitchen sink. When he went upstairs, he slipped into the bedroom and the bed, pretending not to wake her.

Nina wasn't interested in worms. He thought she was at first. Sometime their first year, she was watching him prepare a batch to deliver to Shorty's Place. When he tossed a worm aside on the grass, she'd said, "What's the matter with that one?"

"He's dead."

"Well, what's the difference? They're all going to be dead."

"They got to be alive when you put them in the water. You want bait to wiggle and attract the fish."

"Well, when you run the poor thing through with a hook, it'll kill him, won't it?"

"Not if you do it right. See, you put the point in here, through this collar, just deep enough to hold him."

She touched the rejected worm with a red-nailed toe. "This one's lucky then."

"There's another reason you don't want a dead worm in with the rest." He wanted to educate her. "They give off a poison that'll kill the whole—" The screen door squealed. He looked up as it slapped shut against her slow heels.

His dad had taught him all about fishing and the worms. It was only pleasure then. The farm was a real farm; the barnyard stirred with life, and fields of corn and alfalfa shimmered.

Denny's paternal grandmother had taken care of them. All he knew about his mother was "she left us." He thought she should have provided him a brother before she disappeared. Even when he learned, at age 13, that leaving them meant dying during his birth, Denny couldn't forgive her. Perhaps if she'd eaten better or called for a doctor sooner, she'd have survived to be the mother-wife they needed.

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Nina couldn't give him sons or daughters. Doc said it was probably because of the time her pony fell on her.

Babies smell of ammonia and sour milk and leave sticky spots on everything they touch. But once through that messy stage a son would be nice. Denny fantasized teaching his boy how to hook the worm, throw the line, bring it back, unhook the fish.

They were fishing, Denny and his dad, backs against a fragrant buckeye. Sunshine rocked in splinters over the lake. They half slept, and then, although there'd been no sound, they were suddenly aware of something alien.

Scalps tingling, they turned cautiously to see a thick black snake oozing across roots, stealing Denny's catch. The undersized crappie wasn't worth the sweep of rage he felt. Before he could convert the feeling to action—a stick, a rock, the heel of his boot—the moment and the snake slid away . . .

His eyes opened and Nina was gone. Denny rolled out of bed and dressed to go to Shorty's Place with the night's harvest.

Two strangers in Bermuda shorts squatted over the map that Marve was carving into the sand driveway with a windshield-wiper blade. Elbows on knees, Clive Johnson and Paul Ledbetter sat on the Coke cooler, watching Marve's overweight sister pump gas. Lying in the shade of the "Nightcrawlers 60¢ a DOZ" sign, Marve's mixed breed greeted Denny with two thumps of her tail. No one else acknowledged him.

Denny set the bait bucket on the ground and hoisted himself to the hood of his pickup to wait. The Shorty's Place billboard creaked in an imperceptible breeze. Denny stared at Marve's dirty, dented Chevy four-door.

Shorty was Marvin Siler the first, long dead. There'd been three Marvins since, none short or tall enough to deserve the nickname. This was the only grocery in 20 miles, gas station in ten, bait shop in four, boat dock in one.

The tourists' camper doors slammed, and they backed and filled, throwing dust, before grabbing the highway.

Marve strolled over, hands tucked inside his overalls bib, shirtless, barefooted, smiling, always smiling.

He stooped to peel the lid off the bait bucket. "Man, oh, man, don't they look tasty. How many you got here?"

"Whatever you count is okay by me."

"Listen to him. Now there's a beauty. Will you look at that snake?"

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Marve dangled one worm out of the bucket, maybe eighteen inches long.

"What's the biggest sucker you ever found, Den?"

"The one that got away."

Marve laughed too loudly and led Denny inside for his money.

Marve's mother sat in her upholstered chair by the cash register. She was monstrously fat. When he and Marve were boys, Denny had been embarrassed to look at her because he couldn't help mentally undressing her and being amazed. When the sheriff came for Marve at recess the day his father died, skinny Nina had sniggered behind her hand to Denny, because he was nearest, "Bet she rolled over on him."

Denny avoided touching the white sausage fingers counting out his money.

"Didn't do so good last night," she wheezed.

"Didn't have my mind on it, I guess."

"Could be you're working the same place too much. You oughter let it be and try somewheres else for a spell."

"No, there's plenty left."

"Why is it you go so far off? They's easy pickings in your own yard."

"Worms aerate the soil. They're good for grass and crops. I leave them alone where I'm plowing."

"And where's that?" she sneered.

Marve whooped, "You put your foot in that one, man!"

Marve followed him to the pickup. "Full moon tonight, Den," he said. "Last full moon was when me and Clive saw that Loch Ness monster—the thing in the lake that resembled a giant nightcrawler. 'Member, Clive?"

Laughter.

Marve put a brotherly arm across Denny's shoulders. "When you're out there all alone, banging that metal stake, doing your dance, summoning them worms, did you ever wonder if something else might answer your call? Something you ain't prepared for?"

Smothered laughter. Denny grinned getting into the cab. Marve put a hand on the open window.

"I'd sure hate to see some slimy critter drive up here in your truck with you bouncing around in the bait bucket."

The motor turning over wiped out the sound of their guffaws. Denny's lips were tight until he'd got the truck onto the highway.

When he reached home, the smell of sauerkraut came out to

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meet him. Nina slouched by the stove, stirring, her blonde hair sticking out at odd angles, her jeans needing patches in the seat. Thirteen years out of high school, twelve as his wife, her contours had changed from slender to thin, firm to hard.

Her greeting was: "When do you go to Grayling?"

He shrugged and went upstairs. He lay on the bed, an arm across his eyes.

When Denny was in school, joining the National Guard was the American Way. Being a young male meant Monday-night meetings at the armory and summer camp at Grayling, Michigan. Denny scorned modern boys, their soft lives, not having a draft to worry about.

Marve had been the maverick who joined the Marines. Denny retained two vivid memories of graduation prom. One was Marve surprising them all with the announcement he'd be leaving for boot camp in three days, shocking them with the news he might make a career of it. Denny's other memory was Nina's gentle teasing when, having accepted her invitation to take her home, he took her by the straightest route.

Denny remembered vividly, too, Marve's first furlough, Marve swinging off the bus, tanned and uniformed, white teeth flashing, welcoming the welcomers. Looking over the heads of the giggling girls surrounding him, he'd winked at Denny, and Denny was shaken by a wave of nausea.

The last night of Marve's second furlough, while eight of them crowded around the biggest table at Dew Drop Inn, and Marve danced with Suzie Ledbetter, Nina observed loudly that she and Denny were getting married.

Denny sipped beer and listened to her fabricate details and laughed at the dirty remarks the others made. By morning Nina believed it herself, and Denny didn't mind. So they got married.

She'd cried a lot that first year; but she'd laughed too.

They lived with his dad the first two years. Then the old man had a stroke, turned the farm over to Denny, and he was living with them. Nina resented being nursemaid, Denny's father resented being dependent, and Denny resented being responsible for them and the farm.

Denny's father solved his particular discontent by dying.

Nina transferred her resentment to Denny's failures as a farmer. The more she nagged, the less he tried. He let the weather, insects, and weeds claim one field after another. This year all he'd

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planted was a truck garden. His steady income came from the worms, hardly enough to count.

For three years they'd lived off sales of stock and machinery; and now nothing was left to sell except the land itself.

Marve didn't re-enlist when his initial hitch was up. As the Grayling-bound convoy rolled past Shorty's Place, he'd be leaning on the Chevy's fender, grinning over his beer can, exchanging shouted insults with the men with the prettiest wives.

It was the same old nightmare. A hard rain had ended. Earthworms were fleeing their flooded dens. They littered the road, the yard, the porch. Everywhere Denny stepped, he slipped and skidded on them. And now they weren't worms but snakes, slithering, coiling, following him, wrapping his ankles, striking at his hands and throat.

He woke sweating. Sauerkraut lingered. The sun had left, trailing clouds the color of old blood. He gathered up his vest, knee pads, lamped hat, boots, belt.

Nina sat crosswise in the padded rocker, legs dangling, watching TV. He made himself a peanut-butter sandwich. When he said goodnight, her attention was riveted to a cough-syrup commercial.

Mutt made up for it, wagging all over at the sight of Denny. They started out, passing the barn's remains, now settled into silent rigor mortis.

A fiery ball of moon just cleared the horizon.

Denny stumbled on a fallen fence post, the metal gritty with rust. He carried it along as a walking stick.

Each time he swung it forward, it clanked against the ground. He could envision the worms that roused, stirring in their earth-lined chambers, whispering in worm words, "What is it?" Then they'd ease back into sleep positions, twined around each other, secreting viscous juices, feeling safe.

The fence post whistled end over end as he hurled it away.

The full moon crawled across the sky.

Denny walked until he heard the 11:30 freight bawl at the Cedarville Road crossing. Then to Mutt's confusion, he turned and walked back the way they'd come.

All the way back.

He beat the metal stake against the ground to wake them; he shocked them out of their filthy chamber. His blinding light caught them. The muffled hammer rang and rang. And Nina and Marve were dead before he buried them.

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a *NEW* Loren Mensing story by

FRANCIS M. NEVINS, Jr.

Loren Mensing, the law-professor detective, stops over to visit a college classmate, the lovely Andra—and therein lies the tale. It was a puzzling case, and all its strangely assorted elements contributed to its mystery—the snow and ice storm, the geode, the threatening anonymous letters, the inconspicuous scratch marks on the well-waxed hardwood floor—and especially the black spider monkey named Tar Baby . . .

BLACK SPIDER

by FRANCIS M. NEVINS, Jr.

The first thing Loren Mensing saw as he swung off the Interstate that Sunday afternoon was a wreck. At the juncture of the off-ramp and State Highway 47 two police cruisers huddled with blue roof-globes spinning. A tow truck operator in an old infantry field-jacket was hooking his winch to the rear of a demolished Gremlin while the singsong keening of an ambulance died away in the white distance. One more casualty of the ice storm, Loren reflected sadly, and slowed his VW to a crawl as he passed. Along the six-mile stretch of 47 he counted eight more tow trucks, each struggling through the highway slush with a mangled auto mounted rear-end-up and whirling in reverse to an outrageously priced appointment at some body shop. He almost wished he hadn't decided to make the detour.

Driving home through the sudden storm after the winter meeting of the Association of American Law Schools two states away, he'd been in a wretched mood. The Interstate was a sheet of ice, the filthy gray sky threatened, and the VW's heater had declared a holiday. Around 3:00 P.M. he had resolved to break early, stop for the night at the next intersection with a motel nearby. Then he saw

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the mileage sign CULVERTON 6, and he remembered Andra. He hadn't seen her in the ten years since he'd been graduated from law school but, yes, that was the name of her home town, where she had planned eventually to set up her own practice. And she had been very lovely, and in the shivering bleakness of that afternoon he didn't want to be alone.

He stopped at a service station on 47 and checked the phone book while an attendant in a red parka filled the VW's tank. The listing Hale Andra atty, with office and residence addresses, lifted his spirits. On a stormy Sunday afternoon she'd hardly be at her office and would most likely be home trying to keep warm. He thought of calling ahead, then decided to surprise her. The attendant gave him directions, and he turned east at the Brook Street stoplight.

It was a tall old house, high-roofed and narrow-windowed, and as he maneuvered into the curb behind a bottle-green Catalina he saw lights in the curtained windows. He crunched up the icy path to the front door and pressed the bell button. As the chime sounded muffledly he heard a strange hollow chuckling noise from inside—*yuk-yuk-yuk yuk-yuk-yuk*. After a minute it died away and was replaced by the rap of heels on hardwood. The door opened the width of a chain bolt and Loren saw a wedge of female face, too old to be Andra's.

"Is Miss Hale home?" he asked. "My name's Loren Mensing, I'm a law-school classmate of Andra's, just passing through."

"Andra died last week," the woman told him. Her voice was soft, but Loren sensed a steely tension beneath the words. She seemed to respond to the sudden grief she saw in his eyes, unlatching the chain bolt for him. "Come in, please. I'm Mrs. Boyd, Rose Boyd. I'm an attorney too—in fact, I was the first woman to hang out a shingle in Culverton. Andra rented office space in my suite."

She offered a firm warm hand. Her face was lined and weary, her eyes were an alert milk-blue, her body was trim and straight. Loren guessed her age at 60. "Andra mentioned you several times, Professor Mensing," she said as she led him into a neat front room. "She showed me some articles she'd clipped from newspapers about your—I guess I'd call them detective exploits."

"I wish she'd called me," Loren muttered unhappily. "I wish I'd called her." He forced himself not to think about lost chances, concentrating on the décor of the room. Chippendale sofa and chairs upholstered in blue, neat blue-green area rugs on a well-waxed hardwood floor marred by twin scratch marks at one corner of the

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room, heavy mahogany shelves holding sets of books in uniform bindings, and an assortment of massive-looking rocks. Andra had been a rockhound even in school, he remembered. "May I ask why you're here on a wretched day like this?" he asked.

"I've come by for an hour or so every day since it happened to take care of Tar Baby." She poured coffee for both of them from a glass carafe. Then when she saw his puzzled look her face crinkled into a smile. "Tar is a black spider monkey, about nine years old. I suppose I'm responsible for Andra's becoming a monkey person. I've belonged to the Simian Society of America for ten years, ever since Mr. Boyd died, and I own three myself, a golden spider and two capuchins. Part of Simian's work is finding new homes for mistreated monks. We rescued Tar three years ago from some fool downstate who was keeping her in an unheated outdoor shed. I taught Andra about monkey care and prevailed on her to adopt Tar. She was very lonely at the time, and the company was good for her. Tar grew to be a good companion, and usually was let out of her cage and given the run of the house when Andra was home."

"I've never heard of people raising monkeys in their homes," Loren said.

"I was just brushing Tar when you rang. Come, I'll show you." Rose Boyd got to her feet and led him through a dining room and kitchen to a back bedroom furnished with a low table, a portable radio, and a huge locked cage of plywood and welded wire. Inside the cage Loren saw a coal-black money, about two feet tall, with a tiny pointed head, sad face, and protruding belly and hands much like a human's except for the absence of thumbs. Its ungainly arms and legs dangled as it swung by its long prehensile tail from a steel bar hanging on chains from the roof of the cage. When the animal perceived a staring stranger it leaped to the floor of the cage, cowered in a corner under a projecting shelf, and barked frenziedly.

"It takes a long time for a monk to trust a human," Mrs. Boyd said over the din. "It's a wonder they ever trust us when you think how they're captured. Spiders come from southern Mexico and parts of South America—Brazil, Colombia, Bolivia. They live in the trees and stay up there full time because there are snakes crawling along the jungle floor that will eat a monkey whole. The mother carries her baby on her abdomen the first four months and on her back for the next six.

"Professional animal catchers go through the jungles looking for mothers with newborn babies. They shoot the mother out of the

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trees and if the baby survives the fall it's captured. A few years ago Congress made it illegal to import monkeys into the States as pets, but at least two thousand monks are living in American homes right now and Simian tries to see they're treated decently."

"Fascinating," Loren murmured, and knew that he'd heard enough monkey lore for the moment. "How did Andra die?" he asked.

"She was murdered," the older woman said as they returned to the front of the house. "A week ago this evening, in this living room. Someone bludgeoned her to death with a geode." She took down a heavy jagged piece of rock from a shelf and handed it to Loren, inner surface uppermost. Loren saw that the rock half was hollow-centered and glistened in the lamplight as if tiny diamonds were embedded in the stone. "Quartz crystal," Mrs. Boyd said. "The other half of this rock was the weapon. The police have it, of course. Sergeant Regas is in charge of the case. Everyone knows who the murderer is."

"But I'm not sure we can convict him on the evidence we've got," Regas told Loren an hour later as they sat at a scarred table in the chilly police interrogation room, an electric heater glowing near their feet. Loren had called headquarters from Andra's house, and finding Regas on duty, had identified himself with emphasis on his experience as deputy legal adviser to the department in his home city. He'd been lucky: Regas knew of him and had invited him down for a talk. The sergeant had thin gray hair, a tired stoop, and wore bifocals that made him resemble a kindly uncle; but the eyes behind those glasses were cop's eyes, harsh and alert and untrusting.

"Let me go over what Mrs. Boyd told me so I can be sure I have it straight," Loren said. "Three years ago the court assigned Andra to defend this fellow Steve Heidler who was charged with rape and aggravated assault on a seventeen-year-old girl. Heidler was convicted and sentenced to ten years. He found another lawyer and tried to get his conviction overturned on grounds of incompetence of counsel, or more precisely on the argument that Andra had deliberately thrown the case and let him be convicted because of her hatred of rapists. The conviction was affirmed and Heidler started serving his time.

"Last year Andra began to receive some nasty anonymous letters. Heidler was still locked up but she believed he'd gotten a friend on the outside to type and mail them. Naturally she couldn't prove it. Heidler was paroled two months ago and found a job as a mainte-

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nance man at Tri-County Airport, forty miles south of here. He rented a cheap apartment near where he worked and made no trouble for anyone. But those nasty letters kept coming to Andra, once a week like clockwork, until she was a nervous wreck."

"And we couldn't trace them," Regas grunted. "No fingerprints, the cheapest dime-store stationery, and nothing helpful in the type face. And we couldn't spare the personnel to guard her twenty-four hours a day. Then a week ago this morning the ice storm hit and there was an accident or emergency every few minutes. Everyone on the force pulled thirty-six hours straight duty. The roads were in awful shape.

"Just before seven in the evening we got the call from Mrs. Boyd. When she'd talked to Miss Hale, around eleven that morning, Miss Hale had said she'd be home all day studying some legal papers and taking care of her monkey. Mrs. Boyd called her back around five, got no answer, and kept calling back every fifteen minutes until finally she got frightened and called us, saying she was afraid there'd been an accident.

"A patrol car went out to the Hale house and the officers discovered her body at 7:26. Her skull had been caved in by that half of a rock with the funny name. The monkey was in its cage and barking its head off. The autopsy showed that death had taken place between three and five that afternoon. Naturally we concentrated on Heidler as the top suspect."

"And found," Loren said, "that he'd been called to the airport at nine that morning to work the snowplow and help keep the runways open, and that he'd stayed on duty till nine that night. It's a damned impressive alibi, Sergeant."

"Oh, not all that impressive." Regas sipped noisily from a cardboard coffee container. "I talked to the other maintenance guys who were on the shift with Heidler. Most of them are weak witnesses. Sure, they say they yakked with him every now and then, but it was way below zero and they were all bundled up to the ears, so it could have been anyone posing as Heidler behind the protective clothing."

Loren remembered the alleged friend on the outside who had mailed the threatening letters to Andra. The theory of an accomplice made a certain amount of sense, but Loren needed more. "How about when they were indoors? On coffee breaks, trips to the john?"

"The place was on emergency status." A note of annoyance crept into Regas' voice, as if Loren had mutated from ally to adversary.

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"Breaks were staggered. Each man had ten minutes off every two hours. No congregating around the coffee machine. Two guys claim they saw Heidler in the break room but either the ice glare screwed up their eyesight or they were half asleep. But we can get around them all right."

An alarm began to sound in Loren's head, and every additional word Regas said made him doubt Heidler's guilt the more. He made an effort to be neutral and objective. "So Heidler took advantage of the storm, got someone to take his place on the job to give him an alibi, went to Culverton, killed Andra, then went back to his job?"

"That's it," the sergeant grunted.

"What did he use for wheels?"

"Borrowed car, I guess. His own was stuck in the snow and ice at the airport employees' lot and was still there when we went out to question him Sunday night." A subtle light gleamed in Regas' eyes and he adjusted his glasses on his broad nose. "Want to help us break the alibi?" He leaned back in his wooden chair and studied Loren. "After all, the girl was an old friend of yours, and you've helped the cops before, and you'd be a fool to drive on in this weather. Besides, you're on your Christmas vacation, and I want to nail Heidler to the wall before I retire next month."

It was too tempting an offer to reject. If Heidler was innocent he needed an advocate desperately, and if he was guilty Loren wanted to help make him pay. "You've just bought my services," he said and offered his hand. "And now that I'm an honorary member of the team, would you mind answering a question you'll probably think is ridiculous?"

"If I can," the sergeant agreed puzzledly.

"Why couldn't Andra have been killed by her monkey? Either playfully or in anger, Tar Baby could have *thrown* that geode hard and hit her. Tar's got the strength and her hands are the same as ours except for the lack of a thumb, so she could have hurled it."

"You forget," Regas said, "that the monk was locked in its cage when the officers found Miss Hale's body. You don't think it killed her and then locked itself in!"

"Mrs. Boyd tells me that monkeys are incredibly clever animals," Loren said.

"Not that clever," the sergeant scoffed. "Hell, you think I haven't checked that out myself? Last week I had Rose take Tar out of the cage and climbed in myself, and *I* couldn't twist a key in that lock from inside. Unless you think I'm not as smart as a monkey?"

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It was a prudent moment to call it a night. At Regas' suggestion Loren used a police phone to reserve a room at the nearby Queen's Inn, and when he left the headquarters building and drove through snow-drifted streets to the hotel, a file with photocopies of all the police reports on the murder lay on the seat of the VW beside him.

That night, buried under two blankets in bed, he called Rose Boyd and told her he had taken a hand in the case. Then he began reading the reports. The only item that riveted his attention was the incident of the vacuum cleaner, and that was puzzling enough to make him call Regas at home and see if he'd understood the report correctly.

"Yeah," the sergeant yawned. "The prowl-car officers noticed two fresh-looking scratch marks on the living-room floor. You may have seen them yourself when you were out at the house. They were on a direct line with her hall closet. When I got there I opened the closet door and found her vacuum cleaner inside. It was the usual canister model with the long hose, and the distance between the wheels on the machine was a perfect match for the distance between the scratch marks. So what's the uproar? She'd taken the vacuum out to do some cleaning that afternoon."

"Sergeant," Loren pointed out, "the file contains a signed statement by Andra's cleaning woman, who says she thoroughly vacuumed the house Saturday, the day before the murder, and replaced the machine's dust bag with a fresh one."

"I remember," Regas said through another yawn, "and she put the vacuum back in the hall closet where it belonged. I still don't get your point."

"The point is that there's also a technician's report buried in the file. And *that* report says that on laboratory examination the dust bag inside the vacuum was found to be perfectly clean!"

Softly and patiently, without a trace of resentment, Regas invited Loren to turn out his light and go to sleep. But it took Loren until two in the morning before he had expelled the puzzle from his mind and slipped into an exhausted half doze.

He woke at 7:30 unrested and besieged by a headache. After a painfully hot shower and shave and a breakfast of aspirin and tap water he dressed and went out into the frozen morning. A thin dirty snowfall stung his ears, clung to his overcoat. He taxied to headquarters, found Regas at work, and asked him to arrange for an interview with Steve Heidler.

An hour later he sat gaunt-eyed on a three-legged stool in a cell,

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trying not to smell the jail odors that were beginning to make him feel queasy. The young man on the iron cot across from him exuded ruthlessness. His cold eyes, the chiseled planes of his unshaven face, the way he held his body coiled almost like a snake, everything about him made Loren want to drop the case and head home, taking his chances on the weather.

"I didn't kill the broad," Heidler repeated in a grating monotone. "Hell, I can prove I was forty miles away, what more do they want? Why hasn't that damn fool lawyer they assignd me got me out of this hole?"

"You know why." Loren tried to keep the revulsion out of his voice. "It's only in stories that a so-called perfect alibi takes a suspect off the hook. In real life it just draws the cops' attention, especially when the person who offers it has a yellow sheet as long as yours."

"Yeah, man, but this time it's real." Heidler shook his head from side to side like a punchdrunk boxer. "If the other lawyer can't spring me maybe you can, I don't know. But I tell you this, Mensing." He leaned forward and his eyes burned in the clammy dimness of the cell. "I ain't goin' back to the stinkin' slam for nothin' I didn't do. I'd rather get shot trying to escape. Whatever you do or don't do, I swear I never give up and go peacefully with no cop nowhere again. Never."

The stark determination in his face told Loren that he had only limited time to try and save this excuse for a man. Whenever Heidler saw a possibility of escape he would take the risk, and if he was killed in the attempt that would close the file on Andra's murder even if Heidler didn't do it.

Loren forced himself to be professional, and taking extensive notes as they talked, he made Heidler relive that icy Sunday eight days ago. Made him recall all the trivial incidents that happened while he was working the airport snowplow, which of his co-workers he'd seen, what he'd said to whom, what he ate and drank, what station the radio in the employees' break room was tuned to.

For almost two hours Loren combed through Heidler's story. Then he called the guard to let him out of the cell and left without shaking the prisoner's hand. After a coffee-shop breakfast across the street from the jail he phoned a cab for the trip back through the gently falling snow to headquarters.

Regas stared gloomily out the window of his office cubicle. "Hope

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the weatherman's right that it'll let up this afternoon," he muttered. "If it keeps up till dark the city'll be socked in again." He had been changing the subject from the case to the weather at every opportunity for the last half hour, and at last Loren understood why.

"You're afraid he's innocent too, aren't you? The same things that bug me about this murder have bugged you. That's why you invited me into the picture so readily. That's why you've been so generous with police reports, and why you didn't mind my calling you at home last night and poking a hole in your case."

Regas let out a quiet sigh as if a burden had been lifted from him. "He *may* be innocent and that's as far as I'll go. But I don't want that animal back on the streets even if he didn't kill the girl. These are my last three weeks on the force, Professor. I don't want the wrong man convicted and I don't want him loose either. Hell, I don't know what I want, except some good warm sun and peace of mind." He pushed his glasses hard against the bridge of his nose. "I thought you might be able to help sort it out."

"I'm still trying," Loren said. "All right, if you've thought about the case that much you've probably formed some ideas about who might be guilty if Heidler isn't. Share them."

Regas took a long sip from his coffee container. "Three others might have done it," he said. "The three who were closest to her. Only there's something that rules each of them out. If it wasn't Heidler, it might have been George Wylie, the man she used to go with. Or if not him, maybe young Ernie Blount, the man she went with after Wylie." He stopped and crumpled his coffee container.

"Or if not either of them, Rose Boyd?" Loren asked softly. "Oh, don't look so surprised. You said three others and stopped after two, and I knew already that Mrs. Boyd and Andra had been close."

Regas very carefully said nothing, and Loren wondered why. "All right," he continued, "what rules each of them out?"

The sergeant creaked wearily back in his chair. "George Wylie," he said, "is the deputy mayor of Culverton—first-class reputation. Blount has an alibi a hell of a lot stronger than Heidler's. And Rose—well, way back before she married Henry Boyd I used to date Rose and I know—the way a cop knows things—that she couldn't have committed a cold-blooded murder."

"People change over the years," Loren said. "You might be thinking of a different Rose from the one who exists today."

"I know," Regas admitted. "That's one of the things about this case that scares me."

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The temperature dropped and the falling snow turned to ice as they sat through the wretched day and dissected the problem. Every time the wall clock marked the beginning of a new hour Regas would switch on the office radio to a local station and they would listen to the news and weather. The news was dominated by storm-connected calamities—a four-car collision on 47, a tow-truck operator found dead in his wrecked vehicle at the foot of a steep slope west of town, several heart attacks among people shoveling their sidewalks—and it was almost a relief to return after ten minutes to dealing with a single deliberate death.

As Loren scrawled notes Regas told what he knew about Andra's affair with George Wylie. The relationship had had little chance of growing into something permanent, Regas thought, because of Wylie's medical problem. The deputy mayor had an unfortunate tendency to break out into a rash in the presence of all animals, and Andra's philosophy had been love-me-love-my-monkey. She broke off with Wylie when Ernest Blount entered her life.

Blount, Regas said, was a West Point graduate who had lost his left foot to a Viet Cong booby trap and taken his disability pension into the civilian world. He could walk on his prosthetic foot but the only car he could handle was his own specially designed Toronado, a front-wheel drive model with hand controls replacing the usual brake and clutch pedals. In 1976, when Blount's mother had died in a hit-and-run accident, he had retained Rose Boyd to handle the probate of her substantial estate, and Rose, who was exceptionally busy at the time, had with Blount's consent passed the file on to Andra. Within a month Ernie was not only Andra's client but her lover, and George Wylie was out of the picture.

"Which gives Wylie a motive of jealousy," Loren said. "And as for opportunity, you said before that he claims he was in and out of City Hall all that Sunday, working on storm crises, so he could have slipped away and killed her. The house is only a ten-minute drive from downtown. And as a former lover and no doubt frequent visitor to her house, he'd know that those heavy geodes were on the shelves and he'd also have learned something about monkeys. But"—Loren tried not to make his sarcasm too blatant—"but he's the Deputy Mayor with an excellent reputation, so of course he must be innocent."

"If I had to pick one of the three it would be Blount," Regas said. "He killed a lot of people over in Asia, I hear, and you can't just shake off that way of handling a problem when you hang up your

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uniform. I don't know of any motive he had, but anything can happen between lovers. And as her current boy friend he'd know about the geodes too, plus he'd have learned some monkey stuff. If only he didn't have that damn alibi! It sounds so hokey I almost have to buy it."

"Run it past me again." Loren squeezed his eyes shut tight.

"One gimmick on that car of his," Regas began, "is that it's impossible to tamper with the mileage reading. The car has a new protective device that the manufacturer started offering a few years ago when there was all that publicity about used-car dealers routinely setting back the mileage on the autos they sold. I've checked with Consumers Union and this baby is tamperproof."

"At this point enter the Jergens kid," Loren said. "The ten-year-old with the wacky hobby, who lives in the same townhouse complex with Blount. He likes to peer into parked cars and record the mileage figures and guess from the daily increases where each car was driven."

"He read Blount's meter a week ago Saturday afternoon," Regas continued. "You saw the penciled note in the file. As of 4:00 P.M. that day the mileage was exactly 21472. And Blount saw the kid take down the figure and told us about it late Sunday night when we paid him a visit to break the news and question him. He went out to his parking slot with us, unlocked his car, and showed us the mileage—and by damn it still read 21472."

"And no one in the townhouses remembers the car being out of its slot at any time Sunday," Loren added, "although considering the weather I doubt that anyone really would have noticed. All right, how about Rose Boyd?"

"Rose is a mighty sharp lawyer," Regas said slowly. "Maybe too sharp. Maybe that's one reason why I, ah, don't date her now. Since her husband died her life has revolved around three things—money, monkeys, and clout. Being in the same office suite with her, maybe Miss Hale found out something she shouldn't have. Rose doesn't have an alibi, but she's the one who called headquarters and precipitated the finding of the body."

"She could have done that just to make herself look innocent," Loren pointed out. "You know, it's too bad monkeys can't talk. Her golden spiders and her capuchin could tell us whether she was home all Sunday as she claimed."

"Hell," Regas grunted, "if monks could talk we could just ask Tar Baby who killed Miss Hale."

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Loren thought about that remark, and about other things, and closed his eyes again, retreating deep into himself. Then he emerged into the stuffy cubicle again, and blinked, and came close to grinning stupidly.

"Who says we can't do just that?" he asked.

The storm had mercifully blown away before dusk, and a little after eight that evening Loren paused in his analysis of the case, and standing before the mahogany shelves in what had been Andra Hale's living room, scanned his audience. Sergeant Regas, eyes hooded behind his bifocals, rubbed his palms together as if his hands were cold. Rose Boyd sat stiffly in a high-backed armchair, her face carefully empty of expression. Deputy Mayor George Wylie, a tall lean fortyish man with pouched eyes, sprawled at one end of the Chippendale sofa. At the other end sat the Vietnam veteran, Ernest Blount, round-faced and stoic-looking, tapping his fingers against his thick cane.

From the back bedroom the harsh yapping continued, keeping nerves on edge. Loren would have identified the sound as a dog barking if he hadn't known it was the monkey. Tar Baby had begun the outcry when the first strangers had unlocked the house that evening—Loren, Regas, and the two plainclothesmen who now stood warily near the front door—and Mrs. Boyd had excused herself several times during Loren's presentation and gone back to try and calm Tar, but nothing had worked. It was almost as if the black spider knew that the fate of its mistress' murderer was being sealed.

"Back to business," Loren said. "Now that we've gone over the basic facts of Andra's murder, let's eliminate the least likely suspect." Blount and Wylie and Mrs. Boyd stirred and glanced at each other. "None of you," he went on. "I meant the monkey. Monks are known to be quite strong, and except for lacking thumbs Tar's hands are just like a human's. One of the first thoughts that crossed my mind was whether Tar could have hurled that geode, playfully or in anger, and killed Andra. Sergeant Regas disproved that theory by pointing out that when the officers found Andra's body, Tar was securely locked in her cage, and that there was no way Tar could have locked herself in.

"Now my original assumption, and the sergeant's too, was that Tar had been locked in her cage before Andra's killer came here and stayed locked in throughout the crime. However, there's nothing that compels us to believe this. And the fresh vacuum-cleaner

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scratch marks found in this living room suggest the opposite theory." He pointed toward the twin scratches defacing the polished floorboards. "They suggest that, as Mrs. Boyd told me was often the case when Andra was home, Tar was free and loose at the time of Andra's death!"

Rose Boyd's eyes widened with a sort of horror, then blinked shut as if the woman had retreated into herself. A glint of puzzlement showed on the deputy mayor's face. "You'd better explain what that means. I never learned too much about monkeys when Andra and I were going together."

"Glad to oblige, Mr. Wylie. Please remember that Andra's vacuum cleaner was a canister model, on wheels, and with a long hose. Now her cleaning woman had thoroughly vacuumed the house on Saturday, the day before the murder, and had replaced the dirt-filled dust bag with a clean fresh one—which was still immaculate and empty when the police found the machine the next day. Therefore the vacuum cleaner, when it was removed from its customary place in the hall closet, was not taken out for use as a sweeping instrument.

"Why then was it taken out? This afternoon, Mrs. Boyd, I remembered something you told me yesterday, namely that in the jungle monkeys are preyed on by snakes that can swallow them whole. Now, think of that long vacuum-cleaner hose, which, I submit, resembles nothing so much as a snake! If you were a monkey, wouldn't you run like hell if that hose were being brandished at you?

"Therefore I concluded that Tar was free in this house at the time of the murder, actually witnessed the death of Andra, and was herded back into her cage afterwards by the killer with the help of the vacuum-cleaner hose. That nerve-wracking barking we've heard all evening must have been exactly how Tar reacted to Andra's death. No wonder the killer felt he had to get the monkey out of the way and possibly quieted down!

"Now, this conclusion tells us who the murderer was *not*. First, it wasn't Steve Heidler, because it had to be someone Andra identified as familiar enough with monkeys so that Tar could be left free during his visit. If confirmation of the point is needed, it's provided by the killer's choice of an implement to force Tar into her cage later. Second, it wasn't George Wylie, because he is known to break out into an allergic rash whenever he's near an animal, and it's most unlikely Andra would have left Tar out while he was in the house. Third, it wasn't Rose Boyd, because if Tar indeed wit-

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nessed her killing Andra it's hardly plausible that she would have voluntarily come back here every day since the murder, as she has, to feed and brush Tar and take care of her.

"So you see that once the true meaning of those scratch marks and the vacuum cleaner is understood, and all the deductions teased out of them, we can pretty much eliminate all our suspects. Except one."

Ernest Blount tightened his grip on his walking stick but his face retained its mandarin calm. "So I'm to be the patsy?" he asked pleasantly. "Well, unfortunately, Professor, I just don't fit your little frame. By the grace of God and the National Liberation Front I happen to be a cripple. The only way I can get around is in a car specially fitted with hand controls."

"Sergeant Regas told me about your car," Loren said. "A front-wheel-drive model, a Toronado."

"Then did he tell you that a disinterested, incorruptible witness noted down the mileage on my car Saturday afternoon?" Blount's voice rose almost to a snarl. "Did he tell you that it registered the exact same mileage Sunday evening when the police came to question me?"

"He told me," Loren replied slowly. "That was a bad mistake on your part. I'm amazed that a hard-nosed professional soldier would gamble on such a theatrical alibi gimmick. All I had to do to puncture it was to think back to the traffic conditions I observed yesterday as I drove into this town. The major arteries were choked with tow trucks. And several of them had disabled cars mounted on them, rear-end-up.

"Now I've had my Volkswagen towed that way once, and it cost me a small fortune, but it taught me something I hadn't known before. In automobiles with front-wheel drive, like my VW and your Toronado, the speedometer cable runs through the left axle. When such a car is mounted rear-end-up on a tow truck, *the speedometer runs backwards*. And this is true even on cars equipped like yours with a device to keep the mileage from being manually tampered with. The loophole in the device is of no use to a crooked used-car dealer, of course, because no one is going to have a car towed in reverse for five thousand miles just to get the mileage to read that many miles less. But it's of fantastic use to an overly clever murderer who thought it would give him a perfect alibi.

"Blount, you planned this murder in advance. You waited until a storm hit the city to carry it out. But you'd arranged in advance

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with an accomplice to mount your Toronado on a tow truck rear-end-up and drive it around after the murder until the mileage was back where you wanted it, probably a few miles less than the mileage the Jergens boy noted so you could drive back to your townhouse in the normal way and have it read 21472 when you parked it. In that ice storm Sunday one more tow truck working the streets would never be noticed."

Blount's facial muscles seemed frozen in a cadaver's grimace as Loren's courtroom voice filled the house. Wylie and Mrs. Boyd stared at the ex-officer with horror, as if they were watching someone die. His hand on the walking stick had turned the color of ice.

"Your accomplice," Loren went on, "was named Joe Sutton. He owned a towing garage in town. He was the man who killed your mother for you in that fake hit-and-run two years ago, so you could inherit. He helped you kill Andra a week ago Sunday. And this morning you killed him, either because he was blackmailing you or just to protect yourself."

Loren remembered how he'd heard the news report of a tow-truck operator's death on Regas' office radio an hour or so before the sergeant had described Blount's alibi, and how he'd made another connection and insisted that Regas take him out to the scene of the man's death that afternoon. But even if he hadn't made the connection, even if he'd never stopped off in Culverton yesterday, everything would have happened pretty much the same way. That thought made Loren feel ancient and useless.

Sergeant Regas motioned the two plainclothesmen to come forward. "Sutton left a letter in his office safe, Ernie," the sergeant said. "To be opened in the event of his death. He confessed to your mother's murder, to helping with your alibi last week. He spilled it all. I've gotta give you your rights, son." He fumbled in a cracked cowhide wallet for his Miranda card and began to read the litany in an emotionless monotone. At the other end of the sofa George Wylie shuddered a little, and Rose Boyd wept silently in her chair. In the distance the barking of the monkey went on and on.

Loren left Culverton early the next morning, before another storm had a chance to break. A week later, halfway through the night, the bedside phone rang in his apartment. He jerked upright, reached for the receiver, and heard Regas' voice crackling with static.

"Thought you'd want to know why Ernie killed the girl," the voice said. "We went through the paperwork on his mother's estate and

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found a check for thirty-five hundred dollars he'd made out to Joe—oh, what the hell was his name? The tow operator. That must have been the payoff for killing his mother. Miss Hale noticed the check stub while she was working on the estate, I guess, and started wondering out loud, and he knew he'd have to get rid of her too."

"Has he confessed yet?"

"The war hero's still hanging tough, but we'll nail him. By the way, I had to release Heidler today. We know he was responsible for those threatening letters to Miss Hale, but we can't prove it."

"I bet it made you glow to see Heidler on the streets again, Sergeant."

"Just Regas from now on. Today was my last day on the force. You mean you can't tell? Man, I'm drunk as a skunk!"

"Enjoy the peace and sunshine when you sober up," Loren said quietly. "You've paid your dues."

Six months later he picked up a paper and read the report of the Loop Shootout. A lone gunman had been interrupted by two policemen during a Chicago jewelry store holdup, and the bloody running gunfight through the Loop district had ended with one officer dead, another critically wounded, and the gunman riddled with more than a dozen bullets. He had been identified at the morgue as one Stephen Heidler.

Loren remembered that interview in the chilly Culverton jail, Heidler's vow never to go peacefully with a cop again. He wondered whether saving Heidler from the one charge of which he'd been innocent had been worth it. He wondered if anything was worth it.

That night he drank more than was good for him.

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John F. Dobbyn is forty-one and in his tenth year as professor of law at Villanova Law School. He writes us that his "primary interests, to begin at the top," are his wife and eight-year-old son, John. Any "free hours that are not spent in school," or with his family, are devoted to ham radio, music (piano and accordion), and raising and training a quarter horse. One of his earliest recollections is that of his father reading Robert W. Service to him as a boy, and obviously the spell of the Yukon is still upon him . . .

YELLOW FEVER

by JOHN F. DOBBYN

A Yukon night could still your soul
in the peace of a glacial tomb,
Or else it could rage like the anger of God,
till you'd wish you were back in the womb.
And such was the night that I woke in a fright,
for the wind seemed to rattle the floor;
But over the din I heard more than the wind,
so I carried the lamp to the door.
I lifted the latch and the wind did the rest,
as it slammed the door back to the wall.
And there on the ground was the snow-crusted form
of a man who was too weak to crawl.
I hauled him inside to the warmth of the fire
and I stripped off his ice-laden clothes.
He'd a face that was hair except for a line
that the frost cut from ear-lobe to nose.
I fetched him a cup of the broth from the pot
to thaw out those bones cold and numb.
But he lifted a hand, and he whispered, "Whoa, Doc.
If you've got it, I'd rather have rum."
I fetched him a glass of that yellowish stuff

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that the Indians bring from the south.
He hoisted himself, and he drained every drop,
until streams of it ran from his mouth.
Then he stiffened as if in the grip of some pain,
and he pointed a hand at his leg.
"It's busted up, Doc. Can you fix it?" he said.
Then he passed out as cold as a keg.
I chipped through the ice that had crusted around
his leg like a watery case;
And I found a crude splint made of branches of wood,
tied with rope for a pioneer's brace.
Anesthetic was scarce, so I hustled about
to be finished before he came to.
By the time that he stirred, I had fashioned a cast
from his hip to the top of his shoe.
He was dishwater weak when he started to speak,
and exhausted in belly and bone,
But I spooned and he chewed on some pemmican stew
till he sat up and ate on his own.
And he ate till I thought that he'd bust if he sneezed,
and the color came back to his skin.
Then he lit up a pipe, and I swear through the hair
you could count every tooth for the grin.
"You've got a reason to grin. You've the look of a man
who's come through Hell," I said.
And "Doc," says he, "if Hell were cold,
you'd have hit the nail right on the head."
Then he straightened and said, "You've done good for me, Doc,
and I hate to repay good with bad,
But the news that I've got is just eating me up,
and delaying won't make it less sad.
It was back in the spring, I'd come in from the traps
for a fling at the bars and the games.
I was down to the last of the cash from the furs,
what with whiskey and girls without names.
So I figured I'd blow it the rest of the way
at a table of gentleman's stud.
The stakes were okay when we started to play,
but we ended up playing for blood.
Your brother was holding a chair in that game,
and that was the night that we met.

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In the very last hand we both checked with two pair,
when a grubstaker started to bet.
I stayed like a fool, and your brother did too,
and the stakes got more steep with each hike,
Till the last thing that grubstaker threw in the pot
was a map he said led to a strike.
I know most of those maps are just prospector's dreams.
You could use 'em to paper your wall.
But the dog-hungry glare in that prospector's stare
made us bite, so we said that we'd call.
The look that passed over that prospector's face
wasn't pain or remorse, but relief.
As he tossed in his cards, he said, 'Good riddance, boys,
That old map's brought me nothing but grief.'
I looked at your brother, and he looked at me,
and we laid down our hands for the call.
We had two pairs apiece, nines and jacks with a trey,
so we set about splitting it all.
When we got to the map, there was no way to split,
so there seemed to be one thing to do.
We shook hands on a scheme to go after the dream—
what a nightmare that dream led us through.
The money we won in that very same pot
was enough to get all that we'd need.
We bought us a sled and some grub and warm clothes,
and nine dogs that had courage and speed.
For a month out of Dawson the going was soft,
and nothing a kid couldn't take,
But then it began, like a curse on our plan,
that tried us with every bad break.
By then we had left every vestige of life,
and for three hundred sixty degrees,
The horizon was stark, so damned lifelessly stark,
that you'd sell your right arm for some trees.
We were mushing on snow that repelled the sun's glow,
till the glare nearly drove us both blind.
Our eyes were like slits that we'd open in bits
to see what our compass would find.
I was riding the sled, with Jim running the tread,
when we lunged, and Jim pulled the sled back.
But a gaping ice flaw had sucked into its jaw

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the lead dog and three of the pack.
I grabbed hold of the sled, while Jim raced to the head
and cut the four loose with his knife.
It was tough to lose four, but we could have lost more,
so we settled with fate for our life.
When we started to go, it was painfully slow,
'cause the weight was too much for the five,
So we jettisoned all but the rations of food
just enough to keep us alive.
We rationed the food to the dogs and ourselves,
and for weeks we drove on at half fare,
Till I figured that if we weren't killed by the cold,
we'd starve by the time we got there.
We shortened the turns that we'd drive and then ride,
and it helped to keep *us* on the go,
But the dogs were exhausted from hunger and strain,
and at night they'd collapse in the snow.
They were mean to begin, but the hunger and strain
made them meaner than wolves in a trap,
Till if anything came within range of their jaws,
you could feel the air shake with their snap.
It was Jim's turn to hitch up the dogs to the sled,
and they snarled as he set up the trace.
He was hitching the harness on dog number three,
when the second dog sprang from its place.
Jim was knocked to the ground by a white twisting mound
and its teeth found the side of Jim's face.
Then the others saw blood, and the passions that sleep
in a dog with a wolf for its seed
Overcame their restraint, and before I could move,
all the dogs were on Jim for a feed.
He'd have died on the spot but for one saving thought.
With his hand he could just reach his knife:
And he plunged in the blade till his hand met the fur,
and the dog at his throat lost its life.
Then with all of the strength that was left in his arms,
he raised that dead load to the sky.
He flung it away, and the rest of the dogs
set upon it with blood in their eye.
By the time they had finished, they'd stripped it clean bare,
and their hunger was eased for a spell.

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But when Jim tried to walk, he collapsed to the ground,
and the pain in his leg made him yell.
We cut open his pants, and I knew at a glance
it was broke by the jaws of a dog.
So from then till the end, it was me in the tread,
while Jim rode on the sled like a log.
Between hunger and cold, and exhaustion and pain,
I was close to the point of defeat,
But the call of the gold, like a deafening shout,
said, 'You'll lose me if once you retreat.'
It's a sickness, I know, but it's got me for good;
and if God laid the choice on the line
Between life evermore and the gold here and now,
the last of the two would be mine.
It was all of a month, plus or minus a day,
since the accident happened to Jim,
When the crests of the peaks that were shown on the map
first appeared—snowy, ghostlike, and dim.
I whipped on the dogs though I knew they were spent
'cause my lust for the gold couldn't wait,
And in less than two days we were into the hills
that were marked on the map as 'the Gate.'
The map led through passes so hidden and steep
that I'd bet every nugget we found
That the quest for each line on that wrinkled old map
had put many a man underground.
But we stuck with it, Doc, and you'll know that it's true
if you look in my eyes when I say
We found it! We struck it! My God, it was there!
I'd have given my life for that day.
Well, I staked out the spot, and I'll file on the land
when I make it to Dawson next week.
But the story's not over. The worst of the trip
was the trail that led back from that peak.
We had four starving dogs for a trip that took nine,
and though Jim was not one to complain,
I could see by the flinches he'd make that the pain
must have driven him nearly insane.
But we knew that we'd struck it, and all that was left
was to make it to Dawson alive.
So we played with the odds and killed one of the dogs,

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and the food helped the rest to survive.
For a month we went on, and it started to look
like we'd make it, though not by a lot,
When the final blow came, and I'll tell it true, Doc,
and then you can believe it or not.
I had hitched up the dogs for the day's trek ahead
and turned back to help Jim on the sled,
When the dogs caught a scent and went panicking off,
and I fell in the trace on my head.
The next thing I knew I was caught by the sled
with my leg in a strange kind of bend.
I yelled at the dogs, but before they could stop,
I was tumbling end over end.
When everything stopped, I could feel through the clothes
that my leg was as bad off as Jim's,
So I tied it in splints with some wood from the sled
till at last I could stand on two limbs.
But standing was all I could possibly do,
I could never have run in the tread;
And the dogs couldn't carry us both on the sled—
If we tried it we'd both wind up dead.
And that's when we turned to the fates for a choice,
'Cause we knew only one could get back.
We'd settle who'd stay and who'd go by the cards,
so Jim reached in his shirt for a pack.
We both held our breath as we each cut a card
to see who would come through this alive.
Your brother went first and came up with a three,
and I'm here because I drew a five.
Now that's the truth, Doc, and this here was Jim's deck.
I told you all this so's you'd know
That we'd worked it out fair, 'cause it could have been me
that was buried back there in the snow."

I was numbed when he said that my brother was dead.
Little Jimmy and I were good friends.
We had loved one another in spite of the fact
that our lives led to different ends.
I picked up the cards that the stranger brought back
and riffled them like Jim in a wave.
Then I looked at each card, and I found as I did

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a demand for revenge from the grave.
Now the stranger said, "Doc, I'm obliged for the help.
I'll be leaving for Dawson at dawn."
I had all I could do to retain my control
when I thought of him here and Jim gone.
And I've got to admit that if thoughts could destroy,
I had thoughts that could blast him to Hell.
But I thought of the oath that I swore as a Doc,
and a God-fearing doctor as well.
So I looked in his eye with the kind of a look
that says, "Listen! I won't say this twice."
And my voice had a kind of deliberate calm,
but it held him as if in a vice.
"I've got two things to say, and the first one is this:
You're not leaving this cabin at dawn.
You've lost blood by the quart. If those stitches come loose,
then the little that's left will be gone.
And the second is this: there's a lawman due by,
and I'm turning you over to him.
By the time he gets here, you'll be able to leave—
to stand trial for the murder of Jim."
He came straight up in bed, but the pain in his leg
laid him flat, and he yelled with a curse,
"We used Jim's deck of cards! It was perfectly straight,
and you'll never prove anything worse!"
I said, "Mister, you've spun a good tale, I admit,
and I don't know how much of it's true,
But I know that if Jim played a game for those stakes,
the winner, my friend, wasn't you.
We were brothers, and close as two brothers could be.
I knew all of Jim's good points and bad.
And I've seen him play cards with the sharpest afloat,
and take every last penny they had.
Take a look at this deck that you claim to have used,
and I'll prove that you couldn't have won.
They were marked by an expert for Jimmy and me,
from the back I can spot every one.
Ace of clubs, five of spades, four of hearts, king of clubs,
I could name every card to the end.
You killed him, my friend, and you're going to stand trial,
just as soon as those stitches can mend."

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I don't know if the weakness came back in a rush,
or the thought that he'd lost was too much.
But the stranger passed out, and in checking his pulse,
he was clammy and cold to the touch.
He had not made a move when I turned out the light,
so I figured he'd sleep until dawn,
But I woke in the night when the dogs made a noise,
and I looked and I found he was gone.
If I dreamed it or heard it I can't say for sure,
but it seemed that the wind and the snow
Were the tools of revenge of that wilderness land
to bring justice where law couldn't go.
When I woke I could tell that the night had been cruel
and a test for a man at his peak;
And I couldn't but wonder if one could survive
who was tired and crippled and weak.
Well, the answer came soon. It was well before noon
when I heard a dog's yelp in the snow.
I could see as I broke through the drift at the door
that three dogs had a dog sled in tow.
They came back to the place where they'd last had a meal,
and their passenger came for the ride.
I could tell by the stare in his eyes that he'd died,
so I carried his body inside.
When I took off his clothes that were wet from the snow,
I could see that he'd taped to his skin,
A yellowed old parchment that turned out to be
the map that had killed him and Jim.
As I looked at that rag with a few simple lines,
I was actually struck to the core,
That a paper could kill at least two that I know,
and the Good Lord knows how many more.
I figured since I was my brother's sole heir,
and the stranger left none that I knew,
By the rights of succession that map should be mine,
and in that case I knew what to do.
By the flame that I'd built to cook bacon and beans
I made certain that once and for all
That siren would never again be the death
of a man who was drugged by its call.

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 520th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . an unusual first story about a Frisbee master's encounter with the Law in the small town of San Isadore . . .

The author, R. D. Brown, has told us little about himself. He wrote: "I'm an academic—a category that doesn't need explanation . . . I've done a good deal of technical writing . . . My hobbies are teaching and keeping Irish Wolfhounds." Perhaps we will learn more about the author with his next story . . .

GO WITH THE FLOW

by R. D. BROWN

I could have parachuted into San Isadore from a helicopter with a smoke flare in each hand, but I figured the trick van with the *FRISBEE* vanity plate and the day-glo eye-of-Buddha painting would get the job done. I parked in the lot of the Gulf Vista Seafood Restaurant and set up shop on the beach. That meant sticking my sign in the sand, getting out of my wind suit, and doing boomerang tosses till somebody got curious.

At first I threw simple wristers, putting it out 30 feet and retrieving without moving my feet. But the public never understands what looks easy, so I started working for distance. I had good lateral control, but I was tossing upwind and that made it look hard because I had to jump straight up once in a while.

I'd just caught one behind my back when I saw I had an audience. They were standard beach kids, blond and blue-eyed, with tans the color of cocoa, a boy and a girl. The boy didn't like what my sign said.

"Hey, man! What makes you think you're so good I should pay?"

"Playing Frisbee with me is a spiritual experience," I told him.

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I did a split Peabody. It impressed the girl, but the boy was *macho*.

"How 'bout we bet ten? Whoever drops the most."

I tossed the disc up and caught its edge on my thumb to let it spin while I explained. "I'm a Frisbee master. I make you look good, give you nifty retrieve chances, and teach you moves. Besides, nobody wins at Frisbee. That's why I like it. Try five minutes and see."

He wasn't a bad kid, but he wanted to impress the girl, who was worth impressing, not San Isadore material at all. He started smoking them at me, but I caught everything with one finger and he calmed down. When I flipped to him, I laid on overspin to give him moves. Then I showed him how to use the retrieve as the let-out for a concerted return and we were friends.

He gave me a dollar when we quit and I handed him the Frisbee. He was running with sweat, but he was happy. A decent crowd had come up, and I could see prospects thinking it over. The girl had been watching me. I don't bulge with muscles, but Frisbee is great exercise.

"You want to play, Miz? I'm into equal opportunity," I told her.

"I don't have any money," she said.

"The sign says love offerings. A smile would do."

She gave me such a smile! And then a look as if someone had shoved a piece of overripe cheese under her nose. That puzzled me until I heard a voice like a rusty hinge behind me.

"She's never going to play with you, Shorty," it said.

The identification over one pocket said *LaMarr Stryker*, and his San Isadore badge told me the rest. He was six four, about 230, muscled and mean. He probably practised the snarl in front of a mirror. Right now he was using it in front of a crowd that thought this might be more interesting than Frisbee.

"You got rules against running and jumping on the beach?"

"You have a vendor's permit, Shorty?" he asked. I was about to tell him I was one inch over the average height for the American male when it got worse.

"I can tell you he doesn't, Officer Stryker," said a civilian standing beside him. This one was only 50, but from the way his eyes kept sliding up and down the figures of the girls in bathing suits he was practising to be a dirty old man. He searched his yellow teeth with his tongue and frowned.

"Take a look at my sign," I said. "I'm not selling. How about it?" I asked the kid who'd shrunk back into the crowd. "I gave you the friz because we played."

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"Right," he mumbled, staring at the sand. I decided this pair, Stryker and the civilian, were bad news for everybody, not just for strangers.

"You picked the wrong chick to proposition, Shorty. Tell him who you are, Glendora," Stryker ordered. He put a different look on his face and I decided I didn't like that one either. I wasn't alone because Glendora glanced at him as if he were something a dog had left on the beach.

"I'm Chief Biggart's daughter, for what that means. I'm going to tell him how they rousted you just for playing Frisbee."

She had purple eyes, something you don't often see in a blonde. I decided I'd like to play Frisbee with her, but Stryker's friend, Yellow Teeth, had another idea. He whispered something that made them both smile.

"All right," Stryker announced. "We got a riotous assembly ordinance in this town and I'm invoking it. Move out—now!"

Apparently Stryker had quite a rep because those kids started moving off, not even muttering as they did. I turned around to pick up another Frisbee but I didn't intend to go anywhere. Stryker and I agreed on that.

"Not you, Shorty. What do you do for a living?"

"Right now I play Frisbee."

That was the right answer. "Okay," he said. "No visible means of support. That makes you a vagrant in San Isadore. Come on."

I looked at Glendora. Purple eyes. "Honey, would you put my kit in my car? The keys are in it, and I'd appreciate your keeping them till I get loose from these turkeys."

I didn't see Stryker's hand move, but I was on the sand and my head hurt. I decided it wouldn't do any good to claim police brutality. Yellow Teeth was whispering again, and then Stryker spoke up like a ventriloquist's dummy.

"Don't touch that car, Glendora. It's evidence of the crime."

I stayed on the sand to make my point. "If the charge is vagrancy, the registration shows I have resources. You can't have it both ways, Turkey." I said it loud enough so that the dissolving crowd would hear it. Somebody laughed.

Stryker looked at Yellow Teeth who spat into the sand too close to my bare foot. "S'all right, LaMarr. We'll think of something."

Stryker had a neat trick to show me. He held his cuffs in one hand and he offered me his other to help me up. Before I knew it, he had one arm up my back and the other behind my neck and I

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was trussed just fine, my abdomen exposed and my wrists immobilized in back of my head. Lawmen in these little towns have a lot of time to practise being nasty.

After he shoved me into his cruiser, he watched me through the mirror. "In case you're thinking the J.P. will help you out, let me introduce you to Judge Colonel P. Hansen," he said as Yellow Teeth climbed in beside him.

"U.S.A., Retired," Hansen said. "I was christened Colonel, and the army promoted me to PFC for sheer military ability, but a name like Colonel helps in selling real estate. You interested?"

Instead of answering, I inspected San Isadore on my way to jail. San Isadore—you won't find that name on any Saints Calendar—was like half a hundred other Gulf ports with bait shops, fast-food joints, beer bars, and some scruffy fishermen's motels. But San Isadore differs from those other ports. It's not built on a beach but at the mouth of a river and the land offers stable footings for high-rise construction. When the developers arrive, it will hit the big time—sewers, roads, and tourist support industry.

Lots of real estate will change hands and some substantial resorts will be built. It doesn't matter that Colonel P. Hansen, LaMarr Stryker, and Glendora's dad, Chief Biggart, are running the place while it has only one stoplight, but with all these goodies in prospect, they can't stay. Upstate, some people had decided that I ought to come down and play Frisbee because the last visitor they'd sent, a man named Sonny Carver, hadn't come back.

Hansen had a one-story beachhouse set back in a yard that looked like a used-car lot—pickups, sedans, a Jaguar roadster, all with out-of-state license plates. Signs announced that this was a real-estate office, a notary public, a title company, a postal substation, and a J.P. court. In lots of ways Hansen was ready to give any passerby the business.

"All those cars are for sale," he said as we piled out of the cruiser. I wondered if a certain trick van was slated to join the crowd. "Come on in and let's get this over," he said, undoing a big padlock on the front door.

Inside, he walked over to a refrigerator to take out two bottles of Amigo beer. He used an opener on his, but Stryker showed me how he could pop a cap with his teeth. I stood in the middle of the room and watched them watch me. They were going to let me worry a little, so I examined the room. Three walls were mounted with the stuffed heads of local game animals, but the fourth wall framed a

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set of lawbooks. They nursed their beers some more.

"Frisbee's a challenging game," I told them. "It requires concentration, coordination, and the ability to make valid predictions. I predict you're going to put me away for the night in the city jail. What's the charge? I want to get this over."

They'd been spoiled by dealing with out-of-state motorists and kids with pot in the glove compartment, so Hansen didn't look happy as he banged his bottle down like a gavel.

"Court come to order. LaMarr, strike the cuffs from the prisoner."

Stryker took them off, putting an elbow in my chin while doing it. He sat back down after he loosened his pistol in its holster and I walked over to the wall of books to read them a little law. When I picked up the Index, Hansen was on his feet instantly.

"Drop that book and assume the posture of attention, soldier!"

I closed the book and put it back. Hansen's outburst had even startled Stryker. Hansen used strange bookmarks. After that, the trial didn't take long. Much prompted by Hansen, Stryker said I had obstructed him in a field investigation and owned no fixed address. It took as long to happen as it does to tell. The sentence was $300 or 30 days. Hansen suggested he'd be willing to buy the van for the fine, but I said I had a little more than that invested in it.

Hansen shrugged and Stryker cuffed me again for the hundred-yard walk to a cement-block building painted to resemble adobe.

"You'll like the jail," Stryker said. "You can meet our police chief and see Glendora three times a day."

Stryker and I had different ideas about a good time. I gave him something to think about. "Why does Hansen use C-notes as bookmarks?"

Stryker gave no sign he'd heard and he didn't say anything till he shouldered me into the station. A fat man with a gray crewcut and a complexion to match was drinking something that looked like water and smelled like Christmas trees. When he saw us, he put his glass down and stared at it as if drinking were an unpleasant duty.

"That cheap Mexican gin," he began, but he didn't go on. He stared at Stryker sourly. "Well?"

"Got a customer, Chief. Vag, certified by Judge Hansen. Thirty days or three hundred dollars, whatever comes first. He gets one phone call to front the money."

At first the chief didn't look much like Glendora, but of course she hadn't been drinking cheap booze for 40 years. When he turned

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to me, I could see he had purple eyes. Close up, his breath made me wonder why he didn't have fruit flies circling his head.

"Okay. You got a choice to make. You can do 'A' time till you get your fine up if you want. With 'A' time you get a screened cell, a washbasin, a toilet that works, and three meals a day from my table. That's ten dollars a day. The other way you get no screen, a hole in the floor, no mattress, and you eat surplus hamburgers from that joint down the road."

While I was making up my mind, he gave me some help.

"Nobody's ever gone the whole route. Had a guy put in ten days once, but that was because of a mixup in the mails."

I chose the high-cost options and made my phone call. I said what they expected me to say, and the voice on the other end of the line was sympathetic. "You really need help or are you just playing?"

"I'm playing Frisbee," I said and hung up. "It may take a while," I told Biggart. "So bring on the food."

Glendora was a good cook. She said she was sorry to see me in jail because I seemed like a free person when I was playing Frisbee. I agreed that Frisbee players shouldn't have to do jail time.

"I'd give you the fine money myself," she said, "but I only have about a hundred dollars saved, and they won't take less than the fine. It's my getaway money for New Orleans."

Then she gave me such a smile! I couldn't see that she had anything in common with her old man except those eyes. I began pumping for information. It started, she said, when Hansen insisted that her father hire Stryker as a patrolman. From then on somebody was picked up once a week, a stranger. That explained those cars. Then I asked her the big question.

"Do you remember somebody who was arrested like this about a month ago, a surfer? He drove an old white Thunderbird."

She remembered him, all right. He'd stayed only part of the night in jail because the money came and he had left immediately.

"He said he'd take me with him, but he didn't keep his word," she said. "Well, I can't blame him. I'm just a country fool trying to get to the city any way I can."

"Any way," she repeated to make sure I understood.

She might get eaten up in the city, but she didn't have much of a life in San Isadore with Stryker giving her the eye.

"It's not as if I can't type sixty words a minute and take shorthand, but every time I get my money together, Daddy goes on a *bad* drunk."

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We talked about that, and it seemed that ever since her mother died, her daddy had a drinking problem. Obviously he used it to control his daughter. "You want to go to New Orleans when I get out, Glendora?" Of course, the last guy who offered her a ride vanished definitively, but in Frisbee you go with the flow. She took hold of the bars as if she would bend them apart herself. Now I had a friend in San Isadore.

"All right," I went on. "Tell your daddy I need to talk to him, right now. If you see Stryker, tell him I'm carrying you off."

She left running, and I used the privacy to get a folded bill out of a place in my trunks. They did sloppy policework down here. They hadn't searched me and they hadn't even put my name on the teletype to see if I was wanted. That way they didn't have to falsify any records.

Biggart could barely navigate when he lumbered in, tears running down his face. "That Glendora is the sweetest thing in my life, Frisbee. Don't take her away!"

I waved the bill at him, just out of reach. "Here's how it's going to be, Chief. My fine is three hundred, but all I have is a five-hundred-dollar bill. I don't want those rent charges mounting up, so you turn me loose tonight and you don't have to make change."

Glendora pouted a little till I told her I was going to sleep on the beach and that we'd cut out for New Orleans in the morning after I took care of some business. I took my car keys and cruised up and down San Isadore's main street, looking for Stryker, but with no luck. Finally I parked on the beach and climbed into the back. It cost me half a thousand to sleep in my van, but it was worth it.

The next thing I knew Stryker's ugly face was up against my window in the morning light, his nose flattened against the glass. That was hard to take on first waking up. I let him in before he blew the door off with his cannon. His snarl was set at maximum voltage, so he must have been happy.

"Shorty! We 'bout put out a three-stater on you but here you are, sleeping like a baby. You see this magnum? I use lead slugs and they deform on impact. So come out slow."

Frisbee teaches grace under stress, so I made no unexpected moves. The trip this morning was a repeat of yesterday's—cuffs behind head and a fast drive to Judge Colonel P. Hansen's hall of justice.

One thing had changed, though. Hansen was lying on the floor with a puzzled look on his dead face and more blood than you want to see all over his front. His collection of animal heads and the set

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of the Revised Code lay trashed all over the floor. Chief Biggart greeted me, putting down an empty bottle of Hansen's beer.

"You shoulda left town when you had the chance, not waiting around to steal Glendora this morning. Now you're in real trouble," he said, watching how Stryker took the news.

"I can't handle blood before breakfast," I told him. "You got any coffee handy?"

Biggart didn't resemble the maudlin drunk of last night.

"LaMarr! Go to this clown's van and look it over for the murder weapon. Look real good!"

After LaMarr snarled goodbye, Biggart undid the cuffs and went over to Hansen's beer cooler.

"No coffee, but how about a beer? Get the engine started."

I shook my head and picked up a copy of the Revised Code, its spine broken and no money inside. I sat down in the chair Hansen had occupied while he laid jail time on me.

"Those lawbooks did me some good yesterday, Chief," I said, "and today they're helping me again."

He took the bottle out of his face to let me know he was hearing.

"I told Stryker that Hansen kept hundred-dollar bills in his lawbooks. Yesterday it was Hansen, Stryker, and you. Now there's just you and Stryker."

Biggart put down the empty bottle and stared at the cooler. You tend to underestimate drunks, but Biggart was sober this morning.

"You're something, Frisbee. You arrive and look what's happened. Stryker is going to come back with a pistol he'll say he found in your rig. What you're telling me is you can nail him and then I'll be the man in San Isadore."

I told him I'd changed my mind about the beer.

Everything I did made Stryker happy. When he came back swinging a plastic evidence bag with a big pistol in it, I was handcuffed to the chair and Biggart was punishing his fourth beer.

"He confessed, LaMarr. You got the gun. He goes to the county *juzgado*, and it'll be a gold star for you because you found the pistol."

Stryker acted as if the menu read fruit cocktail and soft ice cream for dessert. This time he cuffed my hands in front and pushed me into the co-pilot's seat. Then he pulled a chain from the dashboard and locked it through the cuffs.

"There's a quarter-inch steel plate on the other side of the headwall. You're not going anyplace, Shorty."

He scorched tires getting out of Hansen's front yard while I thought

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about telling him I didn't like being called Shorty. I decided other topics would be more rewarding.

"LaMarr," I said as soon as we were out on the highway to Queen City, "Biggart is setting you up. He sent you alone to find that pistol. Without a witness you don't have a chain of evidence. You punched me up in public yesterday, and everybody knows you're jealous of Glendora. My lawyer would chop you to bits."

LaMarr took his eyes off the road to scowl, then shrugged. He got along pretty well without thinking. I spread it out for him.

"About a month ago the State Attorney's office sent an investigator down here named Carver to check out police irregularities. He didn't come back."

Stryker slowed momentarily, then hit the siren to clear the high-speed lane. "Nothing to do with me, Shorty."

"Hansen was killed by a big pistol, with a magnum lead slug, like the toy you carry." He grunted, and I went on. "Every cop I know has two guns. You wanted to nail me, so you made the mistake of putting the one you used on Sonny Carver last month in the evidence bag and saying you'd found it in my van. I know you used it on him because Glendora told me. She doesn't like rides out of here taken away from her."

Glendora hadn't told me, but a bead of sweat crept out of his hair and slid down his cheek.

"Carver's probably fishfood in the Gulf now, so I can't nail you for it, but Biggart and I agreed we'd tag you for taking Hansen out last night. That would leave Biggart running things."

Stryker looked like a bull in a ring on a hot afternoon. He swung his heavy head toward me briefly, then looked back at the road coming on at 75 miles an hour. His smile made me want the snarl back.

"They're working on the bridge crossing about a mile ahead, and they have the guard rails down. Then I'll see about Biggart."

I didn't know what he had in mind, but I hadn't expected to make it all the way to the county seat. Stryker was breathing deeply to pack oxygen into his system when I noticed the Red Cross Lifesaving badge on his arm. My luck, a specialist in splashdowns. Sooner than I wanted, I saw the first roadwork signs ahead. Stryker gave me a preview of coming attractions.

"You tried to grab the wheel and took us right off the road. I couldn't get you loose because you knocked the key out of my hand."

When the bridge came into sight, he dropped the tiny cuff key

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onto the floor between my feet. The chain would keep me from reaching it. When we hit the middle of the bridge, he swung the wheel and we were airborne briefly. Then came the enormous splash when we hit the water, but it got quiet quickly as we went into the river.

I watched the water come in the vents, the radio speakers, and the ashtray. This was all new to me, but it was less fun than you'd think. We settled onto the bottom and Stryker unrolled his window. Even more water came in. When it got to his chin, he winked.

"See you in hell, Frisbee."

He opened the door and kicked upward. I thought he'd reach his destination before I got to mine. I used the cuff key Biggart had given me. I'm not much on water sports, so I got right out of there.

Stryker was where I expected him when I popped to the surface, lying on his face with a large wet hole in his back and Chief Biggart standing over him holding a riot gun. "Guess that takes care of it," the chief said, watching me climb the bank.

"Not quite," I answered. "You're still left."

Biggart started to point the gun at me in a thoughtful way.

"We still got you on Hansen's death," he said.

"Not really," I told him. "I came down here to break you guys up. The IRS told us they wondered why all those fines never showed up on Hansen's tax returns. When I found the cash in his lawbooks, I told Stryker. But he was interested in Glendora, not money. When I accused him of killing Hansen, he didn't flicker, but when I mentioned Sonny Carver, he tried to drown me. That left you. Hansen was going to replace you with Stryker, and your booze habit costs money. As an old cop, you didn't have to be told where Hansen kept his stash. You know that anybody who padlocks his front door keeps something important inside."

"Stryker knew the money was in the books," Biggart said, his eyes flickering from me to Stryker as he thought.

"Right. You didn't know exactly where it was, but Stryker did. When you tore the animal heads off the walls looking for it, I knew it was you."

Biggart's mouth was a lopsided O when I mentioned the animal heads, but then he got hold of himself. He kept the riot gun on me as he squatted down to take Stryker's pistol out of the holster.

"Stryker shot you and I shot him," he said.

"In the back? How did I get out of that cruiser?" I asked, waving my cuffed hand at him.

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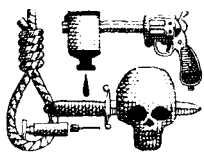
"You're just a vagrant," he said as he watched the river run. "You can vanish the way Carver did."

"I'm new here," I agreed, "but your daughter isn't. If you blow away a man who wants to take her to New Orleans, she won't like it."

He turned around to watch Glendora get out of the van. She waved at us and he stopped thinking about using Stryker's gun on me and became an old man who drank too much.

Two state patrol cruisers were parked at the station. Biggart wished Glendora good luck in New Orleans and went inside. She had her bags aboard already, so I put the van in gear.

We played a lot of Frisbee the next two days.



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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 521st "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . Why did Maxie Hempl ask for protection? . . .

The author, Janis McKee Meyer, taught social studies to "restless ninth graders" until June 1978. Now she is attending law school. She is thirty-two ("but usually very vague about that"), and likes listening to music, sewing, reading mystery and detective novels, and playing tennis. She once sent a story to "Personal Romances," but either it was never published or was printed anonymously . . .

ENGAGEMENT'S OFF

by JANIS McKEE MEYER

Lieutenant Nelson didn't know whether to believe his eyes when Maxie Hempl, petty crook and syndicate go-fer, came limping into the police station to give himself up. Nelson had tried to get Maxie on an extortion rap years ago, but a smart lawyer had got him off. As far as Nelson knew, there wasn't anything they could pin on him right now. So why was he begging Nelson to book him?

"I'll turn state's evidence," Maxie whined. "I'll tell you anything you want to know. Just lock me up."

"Not so fast," Nelson said. He was an expert at playing it cool. "This isn't a hotel, you know. What makes you think you've got anything we want to know, anyway?"

"Look, Nelson, don't hand me that." For a second Maxie tried to look like his old tough self, but the hint of a whimper stayed in his voice. "You know and I know you'd love to get the goods on Mr. G, and I can help you nail him. But you've got to protect me."

"Mr. G?" Nelson dropped his pretense of cool. Willie Gordon, also known as Mr. G, was the prime mover behind the rackets in Fairfield. There wasn't an illegal scheme in town that didn't have Wil-

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lie's stamp on it, but Nelson and his men were never able to prove a thing. In fact, Willie had played his cards right, letting hoods like Maxie do his dirty work, and over the years he'd risen from a cheap thug to a pillar of the community. The Cub Scouts had actually named him honorary Den Father of the Year, and he'd been chosen marshal of the Memorial Day Parade. It made Nelson sick.

Hempl was right on target when he said Nelson wanted to bag Gordon. Even Hempl didn't know how much. Maxie's testimony against his boss would be just what the lieutenant needed for the District Attorney. But Nelson wasn't about to let Maxie know that.

"All right, Maxie, what's the catch?" Nelson said skeptically. "Even if, and notice I said *if*, we're interested in Mr. G, what makes you think I'd believe anything you say? Last I heard you were one of Willie's favorite young punks."

Maxie flashed an angry look at Nelson's description.

"Look, Lieutenant, I'll level with you, but you've got to promise to protect me." Maxie looked so desperate Nelson knew he had him.

"No promises, Maxie. Tell me why you're here, and then I'll tell you whether I believe you."

Maxie took a deep breath. "It's like this. In case you didn't know, I've been handling the protection business for Mr. G for the last three years. I covered the whole north side—the approach, the collections, the enforcement, the works."

Nelson nodded. He knew the scheme well. Mr. G's organization offered to protect a store owner from possible acts of vandalism or violence, in return for a monthly payment. It was one of the oldest rackets, but one that worked just as well today as it had 50 years ago. Any store owner who dared to protest was immediately "vandalized," and nothing could be proved. The store owners were all too frightened to testify, and Nelson had nothing against Maxie that would stand up in court.

"Anyway," Maxie went on, "for the last two years I've been upping the rate and keeping the extra for myself. Mr. G didn't know. He was getting his share, and since I was doing all the collecting, everyone was happy. The store owners didn't know the difference."

Nelson hid his surprise. This he hadn't known.

"I'm not greedy," Maxie hastened to add. "I just tacked on an extra ten percent. And I was smart. I didn't throw the extra loot around like some guys would. I banked it—out of town. I'd saved enough that I was thinking of going straight and buying a gas station down south."

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"Maxie Hempl go straight?" The thought made Nelson laugh out loud. "Hell would freeze over before your crooked little brain would settle for an honest living."

Maxie looked angry again, but Nelson obviously had the upper hand, and they both knew it. Nelson was beginning to enjoy himself.

"Yeah," Maxie said. "You see, I met this dame one night at a bar. She was gorgeous. Blue eyes. Dark hair. Really good figure, not like those scarecrows you see in the magazines. We got to talking and she told me her name—Phoebe Rogers. She said she was a schoolteacher. She didn't look like she belonged in that cheap dive—you know, she had too much class. But she said a friend of hers had just broken up with her boy friend and had asked Phoebe to meet her there so she could cry on her shoulder."

Maxie paused to light a cigarette. "Now, Lieutenant, I don't bother that much with women, but Phoebe was something else. I never figured she'd go out with me, but I thought, what the hell, it couldn't hurt to ask, and she said yes. Imagine, me, Maxie Hempl, going out with a schoolteacher!"

Nelson smiled. Yes, that was an amusing combination.

"Anyway," Maxie continued, "we went out for a month and one thing led to another. I thought to myself, 'Maxie, this is it. This is the girl you're going to marry. She's beautiful, she's got brains, but she doesn't knock you out with them, and she likes you.' She really seemed to care about me, Nelson." Maxie sounded a trifle sad. "In all the weeks we went out we never had a fight or a disagreement even. Except for one thing. I couldn't tell her what I really did for a living. A teacher just wouldn't understand. She had a thing about honesty, so I made up a story about being a salesman, but I knew she didn't believe me. It was the closest we ever came to a fight."

Lieutenant Nelson straightened up in his chair and yawned. "This is all very touching, Maxie," he said sarcastically, "but how about getting to the point? I'm not really interested in your love life." Actually, he was very interested.

"Well," Maxie said, "I decided to ask Phoebe to marry me. I was pretty sure she'd say yes, and we could get married right away. I was even willing to let her keep working—at least until I found a gas station. I figured maybe we could go down south on our honeymoon and look around. I had it all planned. Mr. G wouldn't be happy I was leaving, but he liked me well enough, so he wouldn't stop me, and I was sure he couldn't possibly know about the little commission I was taking when I collected for him.

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"Yesterday I went out and bought an engagement ring for Phoebe. You know, Nelson, it set me back two grand." Maxie stopped and looked at the lieutenant, but when he saw he wasn't about to get any sympathy, he continued, "So tonight when she came over to my place to make dinner, I bought a bottle of champagne. I waited till after dessert to pop the question.

"She didn't say yes right away, but she didn't say no either. Instead she told me that she really cared about me, but she felt we couldn't be happy if we weren't completely honest with each other. I told you she had this hang-up about honesty. She looked at me with those blue eyes and said, 'Max, I couldn't live with a man if I didn't even know what his job is.' "

Maxie wiped his hand over his face. "I tell you, Lieutenant, if a man wants to stay out of trouble he should stay away from dames. They're bad news, every single one of them."

Maxie's voice sort of dropped off and Nelson waited for him to go on. Finally Nelson said, "What happened then, Hempl?"

"What happened then is the reason I'm here. Like a jerk I told that dame everything—how I worked for Mr. G, what I did. I even told her about the ten percent. She really had me convinced about this honesty bit. And I told her about how I wanted to go straight.

"Boy, what a sucker I was. Phoebe started crying and telling me how disappointed she was, and how she didn't know what to think, and how she didn't know if we could go on. She really had me snookered—I felt awful. She was bawling so much she went to her purse for a tissue, and the next thing I knew she was pointing a gun at me.

"Would you believe, Nelson, it was a hit? She was about to shoot me, just like that, but I said I thought I deserved an explanation considering the fact I'd asked her to marry me. She didn't say much, just that someone had hired her to check up on me and ice me if she found out I was up to any dirty tricks. She wouldn't say who hired her, but I knew it had to be Mr. G. Like a patsy, I'd played right into her hands. You know, I should have known she was no good when she said she was a teacher. I never could stand school.

"Anyway, I thought I was trapped, but then the phone rang, and Phoebe, or whatever her real name is, looked away for a second, and I made a dive for the window. She fired a shot, but I jumped out. It's a good thing I live on the first floor. Even so I think I sprained my ankle. I just kept running, and then I realized there'll be a contract out on me by tomorrow morning."

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The memory of his escape must have renewed the pain in Maxie's ankle, because he started rubbing it.

"You know, I've been in the rackets a long time," Maxie said, "but I never thought I'd see the day they'd start sending out dames on hits. It's getting so you can't trust anybody."

"Yeah, Maxie, things are tough all over. Well, I guess you're leveling with me," Nelson said. "You wouldn't make up a story like this. So it looks like you're stuck with us."

Nelson stood up, stretched, and walked over to the door. "Hopkins," he said to the officer who'd been standing there, "book Hempl for disturbing the peace. Then get a stenographer and take his statement. Make sure the stenographer has a fresh notebook—Maxie's got plenty to say." Nelson emphasized the last sentence.

After Maxie had limped out of the office, Nelson sat back and chuckled. He was pleased at the turn of events. What a break!

He decided to make a phone call before he went up to help with the questioning. A familiar voice answered.

"Phoebe," Nelson said, "it worked. You were great. Maxie's ready to spill his guts, and we'll finally be able to put Gordon away. Boy, you really had Maxie convinced you're a hit man. You should get an Academy Award."

"Thank goodness," Officer Rogers said. "I don't know how much more I could stand of that creep. And if he'd found out I had blanks in that gun tonight, I'd have been the one on the run.

"Oh, and Lieutenant," she said before she hung up, "you should see this ring. In addition to everything else, Maxie sure has awful taste."

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 522nd "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . beware of Haddon's Serpentarium . . .

The author, Jane Scherer, calls herself "a late bloomer." She was fifty-three when she submitted her first story, although she has been writing "off and on" since high school. About six years ago, when the youngest of her three sons entered high school, she "settled down and began to write steadily." She has sold to the children's market, but this is her first sale to an adult magazine. Her hobbies include painting, sewing, needlework, and gardening. She doesn't consider reading a hobby—it's a necessity! . . .

THE DEATH CRATE

by JANE SCHERER

I had been looking for a way to kill Prentice Haddon for a long time. Ever since he give me this job. In my own Animal Farm! Well, it's not an animal farm any more. And it's not mine. No. It's a fancy Serpentarium now—Haddon's Serpentarium.

Ah, I'm a little short of breath.

You see, I had this little farm just outside the Everglades. I had some alligators, two old black bears left over from the owner before me, a couple of otters—cute little things—a few flamingos and some other birds. Nothing much. I had a sign out and advertised some. People came in, walked around. A few tourists a day. Charged them a dollar a head and gave my little talk about the flora and fauna. I enjoyed it. But the place was going to seed. That's what Haddon told me.

"Ben, this place is going to seed. Sell out to me."

The hate started right then.

It cost a lot to feed the beasts and it was all I could do to hold that jungle back. You could chop the stuff and clean up on Monday,

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then on Wednesday you'd have to do it again! Hot. Damp. And I'm not getting any younger—that's the truth!

Oh, I had a few Kings and a Corn snake. Plenty of them around here, but I never liked 'em. Slimy things, snakes.

"They're not slimy. Feel the scales, Ben," Marie said to me. Haddon's wife. She knew just how to pick them up and fling 'em around.

Had to sell out. I was barely making it. *He* came—Snakeman Haddon. He who lives by the snakes—well, you know . . . He wanted a big setup. Gets snakes from all around the world. Sells the venom or serum or something. He got my farm cheap, real cheap. What could I do? And he set up his fancy Serpentarium.

I drifted around for a while after that. Till the money ran out. Then I came back and he give me a job, cleaning up and so forth. Snakes are no trouble, I will say. Clean and they only eat once in a while.

The old bears went to a zoo. He kept the 'gators. I give him a shove into their pool once, but they was old and just been fed. He's no spring chicken but, boy, did he hop then!

"A little too much booze, Ben?" he said to me, his eyes fierce. Piercing, the books say. Not that I ever read much—don't have much learnin'. Had to leave school early. Did he suspect about the shove? I wonder now.

It hurts, you know. Some of them poisonous ones give you a bite, you could bleed from every part of your body, even the eyes. That's what Marie told me. Nice lady, Marie. Better off without that stuffed shirt of a husband!

Then a crate of snakes come in from Asia, India, some such place. Well, Marie had twisted her ankle on a tree root and it was bandaged up. Phil was in Miami seeing about another shipment and it was Ryan's day off. Some big doctor was coming from New York to see Haddon, so that left only me. The wheels inside me started turnin' again.

It's a small airport and I thought maybe I could fool around with the crate. I took a drink of my juice while I sat in my beat-up old car and tried to remember. What had Marie said?

"They're vipers, Ben. Very poisonous, very dangerous. Of course, they're well crated and can't get to you." She grinned. A warm friendly grin, Marie has.

Now, I know some snakes feed mornings, some at night. I've heard them myself, rustling around in their cages. Which was which? I just couldn't remember.

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The airport was too busy anyways. I saw the crate though, a big one, off to one side by itself. Stopped one of the hurrying men and motioned towards it.

"Poisonous snakes!" he said. "Man's coming for it soon, I hope. Makes me nervous just being there. Every once in a while you read about one of 'em gettin' loose—" He shuddered and rushed away.

Yeah, they make everybody nervous, except Snakeman Haddon.

So I went back to the Serpentarium and waited for him to ask me to go for them. Then I made some plans.

He asked. "Ben," he said, "Marie's laid up. Will you go to the airport for the Russells?" His blue eyes flicked me. "Shave," he said, "and lay off the juice. These are very valuable and very dangerous. I wouldn't send you but—"

"Ah, ah, sir," I said clicking my heels.

I took the thick gloves with me and the tools I would need.

"They're sluggish in the daytime, Ben," Marie had said.

Best time to fix things!

Men at the airport helped me load the crate into the station wagon and I drove away. No superhighway for me. I took the dirt backroad. No tourists, hardly a car passing. I pulled over and did the job. A few boards loosened just enough—I tell you I had the prickles then, but the thick gloves were on, just in case. I never heard a sound from them though. The juice helped steady my nerves. Then I speeded the wagon up, aimed for a good thick tree, and jumped!

I waited a while. Let them work free. Let time pass. After all, a car accident shakes you up, even a little one, don't it?

The radiator split with a hiss of steam. Good job! Then I sat under a tree and took a snooze. The mosquitoes woke me. I looked around for my juice. Heck, it was inside the wagon! Dumb fool. No way was I going after it either!

The shadows got longer. A couple of big raindrops splatted down and the late afternoon breeze started up. I guessed it was time to walk. I had planned everything real good. I only had to walk maybe a mile. Then it was up to the snakes.

"Where the hell were you, Ben?" he says first thing.

"I had an accident," I said and I put my hand up to my face.

I could see Marie on the porch, a worry frown on her forehead.

"Accident? The Russells?"

"Well, you see the crate got kind of banged up. Maybe some of 'em got loose. I'm not about to stick my head in there and see!"

So cursing and hollering, he got some stout rope and his gear and

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we jumped into his car to tow the wagon back. He started all over again when he saw where I was.

"What the hell did you come this way for?" he yelled. Did he suspect then?

It took time to fasten the rope, to pull the wagon out, and then tow it to the Farm.

Almost twilight, and Marie with an anxious look on her face. My hands were shaking.

Well, he turned on the lights and did what he had to do. Only a couple had gotten loose. It was the one I thought was the last that hit him.

I saw the head come up, but I never even saw the strike! A second's work and the deadly poison is released. I heard Haddon holler and bag the snake. Rough with it, too.

"Got me on the forearm!" he yelled.

I looked at Marie. Would she faint or something? No, her face was only faintly worried.

"Better clean it up," she murmured.

"I will, soon as I'm through."

Vipers—the most deadly snakes in the world! I didn't get it.

He checked the back of the wagon, or seemed to, righted and banged the crate together. Closed and locked the back. Then he hoisted the bag and headed for his house, Marie behind him.

"When Phil comes back, he'll give me a hand with it," Haddon said. "It's okay for now."

And that was it.

I fell against the wagon. Shadows darkening.

Haddon had been bitten by a deadly viper. I mean it, deadly. So why wasn't he raving, screaming? Why wasn't he shocked and dying?

My juice was inside the wagon.

I looked in the window. It was much darker in the wagon, but the crate was tight again. I opened the driver's seat and felt around inside. Where had that damn bottle gotten to? I had to find it, I had to!

I never felt a thing. Just blood running down my hand . . .

It's getting harder and harder . . . The hand is twice, three times the size it was, and black and green . . .

I lost some time there. Shock. *He* gives me a transfusion. He's immune! Bitten so many times, it don't make a dent in his thick hide.

Rough time ahead. It's getting harder to breathe . . .

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ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY NEWSLETTER

CRIME DOSSIER

by OTTO PENZLER

DAYS OF YORE: A new publication devoted to macabre suspense fiction in the tradition of the eighteenth-century Gothic novel is scheduled to appear this summer. *Gothic: The Review of Supernatural Horror Fiction* will feature new fiction and reprints of rare material from the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries, as well as critical articles and book reviews. With the antecedents of the classic mystery story found in such masters of the Gothic as Ann Radcliffe, Monk Lewis, and Hugh Walpole, as well as in such memorable works as *Frankenstein, Dracula,* and *Jane Eyre* (like it or not, they are related), there should be much here to interest mystery fans. A sample copy is $2.25, subscriptions to individuals are $4.50 per year and to institutions $6.50 per year in the United States. Correspondence and subscriptions should be sent to the editor and publisher, Gary William Crawford, at Gothic Press, 4998 Perkins Road, Baton Rouge, LA 70808.

DAY FOR A QUEEN: Frederic Dannay, the surviving member of the Ellery Queen collaboration, was awarded an honorary degree of Doctor of Humane Letters by Carroll College in Waukesha, Wisconsin, in April. Bravo!

DAY AND NIGHT: Bobbs-Merrill will distribute a new series of books published by Peebles Press called The Midnight Library, which will contain both fiction and non-fiction works in the mystery - suspense - adventure - detective genre. Original works and reprints are planned, with several translations from the French of Demouzon heading the list.

DAY AFTER DAY: Some not very surprising research revealed that romantic suspense fiction was the favorite type of book for women readers. In fact, romantic suspense books accounted for more than half of all paperback books sold (now that is a surprise to some of us). Not too surprisingly, then, a new line of books, Mystique Books, has started production and will be published in vast quantities with almost alarming regularity: four new titles every month. Now, if only they approach

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the level of the great writers in this field—Phyllis A. Whitney, Victoria Holt, Mary Stewart—they'll really have something.

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BLOODY VISIONS

by CHRIS STEINBRUNNER

"Youth was so precious to Fedora, she could not bear to part with it . . ." Some critics have stomped on *Fedora*, Billy Wilder's new melodrama, as heavy and dated, and indeed the film seems to be a drive back past his *Sunset Boulevard*. Both films have the same narrative mood and narrator, William Holden, but this time he is a down-on-his-luck film producer seeking out the legendary screen goddess Fedora, in seclusion on a remote island off the coast of Corfu. The actress has starred with greats like Barrymore and Colman, but why has she remained untouched by the years? What hold over her has the sinister plastic surgeon and ancient crone who are her only entourage? Why are there shackles and a hundred white gloves in her bedroom?

The elements are old-fashioned but elegantly constructed by writer-director Billy Wilder, whose contributions to the mystery cinema should not be overlooked. In addition to *Sunset Boulevard*, his *Double Indemnity* was a trailblazing venture into a steamy crime of passion. His *Witness for the Prosecution* was a lush, elaborate version of the famed play, with such enrichment as that gorgeous throwaway curtain line—in which Barrister Laughton decides on the next client he will defend—not at all to be found in Agatha Christie's original drama script. *Some Like It Hot* recycled the St. Valentine's Day Massacre and gangster genre into high comedy. And *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes* is a surprisingly sensitive and loving tribute to the Sacred Writings by an avowed Holmesian.

His current film, in which he shares screenplay credit with long-time collaborator I. A. L. Diamond, is based on one of the stories in *Crowned Heads* by Thomas Tryon, who is as much to blame for the clumsy structure of the plot—in which the explanation of Fedora's seemingly eternal youth takes up fully half the film. (Curiously, a very similar ageless character and identical solution appeared in Leonard Starr's well-drawn newspaper strip, *On Stage*, a few years before the book.) Billy Wilder's fine directorial-scenarist's hand may now occasionally falter, but his biting humor, his touches of irony and respect for melodrama are as wild as ever.

"The scum of the earth are right here in this port," mutters Castor

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Oyl (brother of Olive) in a 1929 Thimble Theater page, and right in the next panel appears tattooed, pipe-chewing Popeye, an *honest* sailor, who was soon to dominate the strip and who this year is celebrating his fiftieth birthday. Avast, it has been no five decades merely of salty humor, but tales as well of piracy, stolen treasure, lost seas, haunted ships, such stuff of epic myth as Popeye's long search for his father, and such superb villains as the evil Sea Hag and her love/hate relationship with Popeye. Along with Workman Books, who will soon publish a comprehensive collection of his adventures on seven oceans, we lift a glass of spinach juice to the most popular legendary seafarer since Sinbad.

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INTERVIEW: SIMON BRETT

Simon Brett (such a wonderful name that it sounds like a pseudonym, which it is not) writes mystery novels about Charles Paris, a middle-aged actor who relishes wine, women, and more wine. His first case, *Cast in Order of Disappearance* (Scribners, $6.95) is funny, and so are all of the next three, with the recent *An Amateur Corpse* (Scribners, $7.95) at the top of the line. The handsome young Englishman gets his theatrical backgrounds first hand, having been an actor for several years.

EQMM: Do you consider yourself first a mystery writer or first a comic writer?

BRETT: I don't think I've sorted out that one yet. I think now that mystery stories are not so much plot (most of the really good plots have been done, although occasionally somebody comes up with a mind-blowingly good idea). They are less the puzzle than other things. So a Dick Francis, for example, has horse racing background as the great attraction—plus very good writing, of course. With regard to mysteries, then, I said, "Okay, that's the structure, that's the discipline, now what do I hang on it?" There are two things: first, the theatrical background, because that interests me and I know a certain amount about it; the other, increasingly, is the humor. I actually enjoy putting jokes in.

EQMM: When you decided to write the first book, was it with the notion of writing a mystery, a funny book, a novel, or what?

BRETT: I think it was just, "I'd like to write." At the time, I was a radio producer, and I'd just been producing radio adaptations of Dorothy Sayers, and I'd been working very closely with the adapter on them. We had broken down the books, seeing how they worked, and I realized that while I had always regarded detective stories as something terribly cerebral and difficult and puzzling, we discovered that her books are

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simply a series of character studies. Lord Peter interviews one character, and then another, and each chapter turns into a character study. So I thought, "Well, I can have a go at that." So that's how the first one started.

EQMM: It seems that Paris is becoming more fully developed, and funnier, as you go along.

BRETT: I think that's because I'm enjoying writing them more and more, and that enjoyment comes across in the form of humor. Part of that, too is "market research." You talk to people and learn what they like about the books, and it's the humor. Also, there are not too many people doing that sort of thing. There are lots of people writing straight detective stories, but not so many funny ones.

EQMM: Paris is a bit amorphous. Since you say you plan to continue writing about him, are you being careful to remember what you have written about him?

BRETT: To avoid direct contradictions, you mean? Yes, I try to. I have somewhere a sheet of paper with various pertinent dates in his life. Like when he left his wife, for instance.

THE JURY BOX

by JON L. BREEN

Devotees of locked rooms and impossible crimes have a double dose of good news this month. The long out-of-print works of an old favorite are available in new editions, and a new specialist in the miracle problem appears with his first detective novel to achieve American publication.

The late Clayton Rawson wrote four novels about his magician-detective, The Great Merlini: *Death From a Top Hat* (1938), *The Footprints on the Ceiling* (1939), *The Headless Lady* (1940), and *No Coffin for the Corpse* (1942). This relatively small output established Rawson as second only to his friend John Dickson Carr as a master of the locked room mystery.

All four are now available in new editions from Gregg Press (70 Lincoln St., Boston, MA 02110) at $9.95 each. They are joined by the first collection of the Merlini short stories.

**** Clayton Rawson: *The Great Merlini; the Complete Stories of the Magician Detective*, with an Introduction by Eleanor Sullivan, Gregg Press, $9.95. There are eleven tales, all from *EQMM*, ranging from "full dress" short stories that are almost miniature Merlini novels to brief puzzle stories. "From Another World" is one of the best locked-room stories ever written, and it is nearly matched in ingenuity by "Miracles —All in the Day's Work" and "Off the Face of the Earth" (though the latter depends on some remarkable stupidity on the part of In-

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spector Gavigan and narrator Ross Harte).

*** John Sladek: *Invisible Green,* Walker, $7.95. Thackeray Phin, like his creator an American living in Britain, solves the locked-room murder of a paranoiac former Army major whose letter to MI6 on pages 71-75 is classic. The novel is pure formal detection, full of references to mystery fiction along with as much word play and free associating as a play by Tom Stoppard. The previous Thackeray Phin novel, the equally good *Black Aura* (1974), has yet to be published in the United States. That's your cue, Walker.

**** Russell H. Greenan: *Keepers,* St. Martin's, $8.95. Greenan, one of the most original current writers of crime fiction, usually comes up with one truly memorable character. Here it's a very likeable lunatic, Nigel Vaughan, held prisoner on a private island by his politically ambitious brother. The novel is full of witty conversation (mostly by Nigel) and unpredictable turns of plot.

**** Len Deighton: *SS-GB,* Knopf, $9.95. This is a first rate what-if thriller, set in England as it might have been if occupied by the Nazis in 1941. The plot is intricate, the style vivid, the characters involving, and Deighton has a fine eye for the telling detail.

*** Robert Ludlum: *The Matarese Circle,* Richard Marek, $12.50. American and Russian agents, deadly enemies, join forces to find and crush an insidious conspiracy to rule the world. This is an incredible (in both the literal and hyperbolic senses) piece of sustained story-telling, a sweeping wide-screen epic with all the virtues of the best-seller-type thriller and all the defects save one: it is not padded, and it sustains its 600-plus pages with no loss of narrative impetus.

*** Margaret Millar: *The Murder of Miranda,* Random House, $8.95. In this tricky comic whodunit, set mainly at a California beach club, lawyer Tom Aragon (who appeared first in the author's *Ask for Me Tomorrow*) serves less as detective than as the One Normal Character in a uniformly wacky cast. The author seems to be having a great time, and so will the reader.

*** Stuart Kaminsky: *You Bet Your Life,* St. Martin's, $8.95. Hollywood private eye Toby Peters solves a case involving Al Capone, Ian Fleming, and the Marx Brothers in 1941 Chicago. Kaminsky doesn't do this kind of thing quite as well as Andrew Bergman, in his Jack LeVine books, but the novel is fast-reading and offers some nice hard-boiled writing and an interesting characterization of two of the Marxes.

** Dorothy Daniels: *Yesterday's Evil,* Signet, $1.75. There's some stilted dialogue in this period gothic—"nefarious deeds" are committed by "unsavory characters" and the well-meaning are defeated by "evil machinations"—but the plot and setting (a reputedly cursed Vermont ghost town) are intriguing and the climax offers some hilariously appropriate noble gestures.

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** Tony Kenrick: *The Nighttime Guy*, Morrow, $8.95. Hero Max Ellis tests magic eyedrops for the C.I.A. in this lively thriller. It's entertaining enough, especially early on, but Kenrick asks us to swallow too many incredible plot turns.

** William Kienzle: *The Rosary Murders*, Andrews and McMeel, $9.95. A new priest-detective, Father Koesler, helps find the serial killer of Detroit's priests and nuns. The mystery will hold most readers to the end, but it's an uneven trip. This is an amateurish job, with both the freshness and the ineptness that the term implies.

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AUTHOR	TITLE	PUBLISHER	RETAIL PRICE	DISCOUNT PRICE
Brett, Simon	AN AMATEUR CORPSE	Scribners	$7.95	$6.35
Burke, J. F.	KELLY AMONG THE NIGHTINGALES	Dutton	8.95	6.95
Cunningham, E. V.	THE CASE OF THE POISONED ECLAIRS	Holt, Rinehart and Winston	6.95	5.50
Deighton, Len	SS-GB	Knopf	9.95	7.95
Ferrars, E. X.	IN AT THE KILL	Doubleday	7.95	6.35
Gilman, Dorothy	THE TIGHTROPE WALKER	Doubleday	7.95	6.35
Greenan, Russell H.	KEEPERS	St. Martin's	8.95	6.95
Kaminsky, Stuart	YOU BET YOUR LIFE	St. Martin's	8.95	6.95
Kenrick, Tony	THE NIGHTTIME GUY	Morrow	8.95	6.95
Knox, Bill	LIVE BAIT	Doubleday	7.95	6.35
Ludlum, Robert	THE MATARESE CIRCLE	Richard Marek	12.50	10.00
Millar, Margaret	THE MURDER OF MIRANDA	Random House	8.95	6.95
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Roadarmel, Paul	THE KALIGARH FAULT	Harper & Row	9.95	7.95
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*PLEASE NOTE: ADD 10% TO DISCOUNT PRICE ON ALL CANADIAN ORDERS.

HELP WANTED—FEMALE

by CAROLYN T. CREW

I had to give up on my plan
To dispose of my partner, McPherson.
Women's Lib as I am, I refused a hit man,
And I just couldn't find a hit person.

© 1979 by Carolyn T. Crew.

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THE FIRST COMPUTER DETECTIVE

by ***BETTY JOCHMANS***

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—I be Em

© *1979 by Betty Jochmans.*

"Q"

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FURTHER INSTRUCTIONS 9 P.M.

by JANE SPEED

(Continued from page 33)

The conclusion was inescapable—that the ransom note had been substituted for Betsy's letter by someone in this house! Yet it took Jack a couple of minutes to digest it. He'd been so certain that no one but a weak character like himself would stoop to opening another person's mail. Well. Clearly, someone else had. So who could that other someone be?

The name that leaped to the head of the list was Kevin. Jack knew for a fact that he'd been in Howard's office; he had the same reasons Jack had for being curious about a letter from Betsy; and Kevin's black mood on Saturday had been such that Jack wouldn't

Still, the obvious choice is not always the right one. Kevin's bitter feelings had been shared by quite a few after Howard's stormy departure. And Betsy's letter must have been lying on Howard's desk the entire weekend, both before and after Kate sorted the mail. So, as far as opportunity went, the field was wide-open. Jack fixed a speculative gaze on the house.

All appeared remarkably serene. Mrs. Timmons, the indignities she had suffered Saturday apparently assuaged, sat at a table on the patio going over her accounts. She looked up and smiled as Arthur, quite his chipper self again, brought out a tray with her morning coffee. Then Perkins, Howard's strapping chauffeur, pulled up in one of the Cunningham cars. He alighted and the three of them laughed and chatted together as the chauffeur awaited his passenger.

Which was quite as it should be, since the servants had not been informed of the crisis now being addressed in the west wing. But were all those carefree good spirits genuine? Jack regarded the group with his newly suspicious eye.

Was it possible that beneath that normal patina one of them was in a state of nervous exhilaration at the prospect of better, freer days to come?

For what was afoot here was no mere ugly spitework. Jack was as sure of that as if he'd planned the thing himself. Whoever had

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been quick-thinking enough to concoct this scheme, and rash enough to set it in motion, meant to see it through, meant to collect the ransom. That "other someone" had boldly decided to use Betsy's flight to gain the wherewithal for his own escape.

What a wild gamble! And yet, on the face of it, the odds weren't bad. The two things that could go wrong at the outset—Betsy's losing her nerve and coming back or Howard's calling in the nosy police—could almost be counted on not to happen. Betsy was, had been from early childhood, a determined girl who finished what she started. And Howard was about as likely to seek the assistance of the police, or anyone else in what he viewed as a world of weaklings and incompetents, as he was to flap off to the moon on his own power. Anyone familiar with this household would know that, whether servant or family member.

Or visitor. Jack added this last as George Petrie emerged from the house, was helped into the waiting limousine, and then driven off down the long drive on the way to his appointed rounds.

Now wouldn't that be a nice irony? Howard's own lawyer, acting on Howard's express orders, scurrying around the city collecting the cash he himself meant to make off with.

Well, why not? Jack let his fancy run with the idea. George *might* have opened Betsy's letter, out of some combination of enforced idleness, resentment, and the simple fact that that particular letter was so easy to open. And once he'd sized up the situation, he could well have been tempted to extort a bundle and fly with Lois to some safe haven in South America, forever free of Howard's petty tyrannies. What's more, George could be virtually certain that Howard would dispatch him to round up the cash. And then—straight to the airport with his loot? How neat and simple.

But, Jack acknowledged with something like regret, quite impossible. As Howard's emissary in these *sub rosa* transactions, George was always accompanied by Perkins, who served not only as chauffeur but also bodyguard-watchdog. And the intrepid Perkins never failed to shepherd his charge, complete with all valuables, to wherever Howard instructed him. Which would land George and those two suitcases full of freedom right back here at the house.

And in a hopeless bind, as far as Jack could see. This little plot had been hatched on the spur of the moment, so there couldn't have been time to enlist an outside accomplice. Therefore, the success of it depended on the plotter's being able to pick up the ransom himself and be well out of Howard's reach before the hoax was discovered.

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And how, pray, would poor old George manage that? Being fully aware of Betsy's supposed jeopardy, he could not decently take his leave till her safety was assured.

On that score, of course, the servants had a slight edge. There was no need for any of them to pretend concern for Betsy since they weren't supposed to know of her plight. But they *were* expected to be Johnny-on-the-spot at all times. Howard was a Tartar about that. And since the staff's day off was Thursday and the ransom was to be paid tonight . . . Jack shook his head and gave it up. He couldn't see how anyone stuck here on the premises could even hope to bring this off.

So it must be Kevin after all. That sudden decision to hare off Sunday morning had evidently not been a wrongheaded impulse, but part of a well-laid plan: if he wasn't on hand when the note was read, he would be presumed ignorant of its contents, and no one would question his continued absence. Which left Kevin free as a bird to pick up the ransom and get clean away.

Yes, it all fit. And, frankly, Jack was rather sorry it did. He was not above finding a little fun in seeing Howard diddled by George, or by Arthur, say, or any of the staff. No skin off their noses that Howard would never, ever forgive anyone who'd done that to him. But a permanent breach between father and son—that was not quite so amusing. Crazy young fool!

Jack thrust his hands in his pockets and headed back toward the house. Mrs. Timmons had gone inside by now, but one of the garage hands had brought Kate's small car around and left it for her. And as Jack neared the patio, Kate herself hurried out and climbed in behind the wheel.

She already had the motor running when Jack came alongside the car. "Where are you bound for?" he asked.

"Post office." She indicated a sheaf of letters on the seat beside her. "Howard wants these to go out right away."

Jack's eyebrow lifted a fraction at this callous display of business-as-usual.

The look was not lost on sharp-eyed Kate. And trust her to find something to say in Howard's defense. "Well, he might as well keep busy. It's certainly better than standing around worrying till—" She stopped, contrite, remembering that Jack had not been given any part to play. "Oh, Jack . . ." Impulsively she reached out to him. "Please—try not to worry so. Betsy's going to be all right. We *must* believe that."

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She gave his hand a final squeeze, then sped away, leaving Jack fighting a disconcerting lump in his throat. Her concern had surprised and touched him; and shamed him, knowing what he knew. What a burden that knowledge had become.

Well—he shrugged and went on inside—it would all get sorted out sooner or later. Nothing to do meantime but watch and wait. He really envied Howard and Kate their busyness.

In the center hall a large canvas container on wheels stood outside the door to the west wing. Anna was evidently making the rounds emptying wastebaskets. Even *she's* got something to keep her busy, Jack thought grumpily as he picked up a stray piece of paper and tossed it into the discard. Then he frowned. That had looked familiar somehow. He retrieved the paper and hurried into the empty library to examine it more closely.

It was an advertisement that read:

A-ONE MESSENGER SERVICE
Your Letter Your Package
Delivered on the Dot
Any Hour of the Day Any Day of the Week
Bonded Messengers Satisfaction Guaranteed
125 Green St., Fairhill 948-2142

A slow smile spread across Jack's face. This, he was convinced, was how those further instructions were going to be delivered. That had puzzled him a little. The first note was so specific about the time—*9* P.M. *Monday*. It had sounded like a phone call, but in these peculiar circumstances a phone call was hardly feasible.

A private messenger, however, filled the bill exactly. And he'd bet his bottom dollar it would be this particular messenger service. Because he remembered now where he'd seen this thing before. It was one of the flyers that had come in Saturday's mail, the same mail that brought Betsy's letter. Kevin must have seen it, too.

As the afternoon wore on and the time neared for George to return with the money, it seemed to Jack, in his impatience, that the whole household was infected with a tense expectancy.

And this was not just his imagination. Ordinarily, Jack was the first to show up for cocktails on the patio. But when he came out today, shortly after 5:00, he found Howard and Kate already there, their chairs placed so they could keep an eye on the driveway.

Conversation was desultory and general, inhibited by the presence of Arthur, who seemed to be doing an inordinate amount of hovering, and by the surprise appearance of Mrs. Timmons, who

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made a ladylike fuss about "only ginger ale for me, please."

Clearly, she and Arthur sensed something was up and they weren't going to miss it, whatever it was. Or did they *know*? For the truth was, Jack was still grasping at straws in the hope that somehow someone other than Kevin was behind this. He even took to wondering, as the minutes ticked on toward 6:00, if George might possibly have succeeded, against all odds, in eluding Perkins' grasp.

But at exactly 6:02 the car purred smoothly up the drive and George stepped out with the two suitcases in hand. If he had tried to wiggle away and failed, it was impossible to tell from his impassive expression. In response to Howard's questioning look he merely nodded and gripped the suitcases a little tighter.

Arthur stepped forward to relieve him of them, but Howard waved him away. "Miss Briggs will take charge of those," he said, and Kate promptly complied, carrying them into the house.

Dinner, of course, was earlier than usual. And here, too, conversation was minimal. Only once was the subject uppermost in their minds broached. When Jeanie had gone back to the kitchen after serving the roast, George cleared his throat and said, "Howard, in a matter this serious, with so much at stake, I really think"—he swallowed—"there's still time, you know—and I really think you should call in the police."

"No!" Howard thundered. Then, more calmly, as if explaining to a child, he said, "George, I may not like it and you may not like it, but these hoodlums have us by the short hairs. We have no choice but to follow their damned instructions to the letter. *To the letter*. And that includes no heavy-footed, bungling police."

George dipped his head in acquiescence and said no more.

Jack looked at him in sympathy. Nice try. And it pretty well ruled out old George. If he were up to some hanky-panky, the last thing he'd want was the police nosing around. Of course, it was a little late in the day to make the suggestion, and he must have known what Howard's reaction would be. Jack could still hear that sententious "follow their damned instructions to the letter."

To the letter? Suddenly, with fork poised midway between plate and mouth, Jack saw how someone here in the house could work this thing. Suppose the instructions specified that the ransom drop was to be made by one person and no other. And what more logical person than Howard's trusted lawyer? So he'd walk right out with the money, and Howard's blessing, and just keep on going. Perfect. Slick as a whistle.

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Coffee was served in the living room and Howard, naturally expecting a phone call, had Arthur plug in an extension there. Jack just smiled to himself and bided his time.

And at 9:00 (on the dot, as advertised) the doorbell rang. Jack felt almost smug when Arthur announced that someone from the A-One Messenger Service had a letter to be delivered personally to the hand of Mr. Howard Cunningham.

"We'll go to my office," Howard said tersely when he came back with the letter, and they all trooped after him. Once there, George and Kate and Jack pulled chairs up near Howard's desk and waited expectantly.

He slit open the envelope, and as he drew out the letter and unfolded it, a narrow strip of paper fluttered to the floor. Jack, who was sitting nearest, bent over to pick it up. He looked at it, then stared, mesmerized. What it was, carefully cut off from Betsy's letter, was that final sentence, written separate and large, "Please, Daddy, *this is no joke*. Betsy." How devilishly clever! Jack straightened up slowly and put it in Howard's waiting hand.

Howard read it, heaved a sigh, and passed it to the others. Then he turned his attention to the letter itself.

"Why don't you read it aloud, Howard?" Kate suggested. "We're all anxious—"

He nodded agreement and Jack, stealing a quick glance at George, perched on the edge of his chair in anticipation.

Howard read slowly, giving due emphasis to all the words underlined: "As your daughter says, *this is no joke*. You will have word of her safety within twenty-four hours *if* you carry out the following instructions *to the letter*." At the familiar phrase he looked around with a grim smile, then continued, "Number One: Money *must* be in *two suitcases*; Number Two: Money *must* be placed inside door of *Laurel Cottage* in Chatham Grove." Howard paused, then shrugged; everyone knew where that was. "Number Three: Money *must* be placed there no later than *11* P.M. *Monday*; Number Four: Money *must* be delivered to Laurel Cottage by—"

Howard came to a full stop, scowling, and Jack held his breath. Then, shaking his head as if unable to believe his eyes, Howard finished: "by *your brother, Jack Cunningham*, alone and unarmed."

All eyes turned to Jack. He just sat there with his mouth open, utterly confounded.

Howard snorted. "Well, I'm damned if I'll go along with that! This is my problem and I'll handle it myself."

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"But you said," Kate reminded him, "that you had no choice but to follow their instructions."

"To the letter," George chimed in pointedly.

Howard glared at them, but he couldn't deny it. He had said that; and he'd meant it, too; he believed it. So he really had no choice. He looked at Jack, that frail reed, and sighed heavily. "All right," he growled. "Better get on with it then. It's nearly half an hour's drive to Chatham Grove."

"But—" It was the first peep out of Jack since his pet theory had come crashing down around him.

"No buts about it," Howard snapped. "God knows why, but you're the one they asked for and you're the one that's going. Come on, look alive now." He pulled Jack to his feet.

Jack turned to the others in silent appeal. But George gave him the old "You can do it, Jack," which was no help; he knew he *could* do it, he just didn't want to. And Kate merely smiled her encouragement and mouthed, "For Betsy," which was worse. Jack groaned inwardly and resigned himself to the inevitable.

A car was brought around and Kate brought the suitcases. They were deposited in the back and Jack in the front, and before you could say flimflam and skullduggery, the gate had closed behind him and he was on his way.

And hating it. That damn clown Kevin! Oh, yes, this was Kevin's work. No use trying to kid himself about that any more. Who else would have named Jack to deliver the ransom? Kevin must have laughed himself sick when he added that wicked touch: Howard all hot in the saddle to "handle it himself," then forced to turn over the reins to his piffling brother, of all people. In different circumstances even Jack might have found such a spectacle funny. But he did not appreciate being made a party to a fraud.

Actually, if he hadn't been concentrating so hard on George, he'd have seen Kevin's hand in this the minute Laurel Cottage was mentioned. Long empty, it had been a favorite haunt for Kevin and his pals in their teens. And Jack was struck by a sudden daunting thought. Suppose Kevin was there now, waiting for him, ready to gloat over the coup he'd just brought off—with Uncle Jack's help.

But, thank heaven for small favors, the old place stood dark and deserted when Jack finally pulled up in front of it. He hooked a flash lamp onto his belt and took the suitcases out of the back. Marvelous what a lot of money could be crammed into such easily portable conveyances. "Even a child can do it," he quipped as he

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hefted them. Well, a large child. Certainly Kevin would have no trouble at all.

Jack made his way carefully up the rickety steps, pushed open the sagging door, and went inside. A couple of field mice scampered across the floor, but otherwise he was quite alone.

Alone—with all that money. And it dawned on Jack that he was in a position to do exactly what he'd imagined George might do—just keep on going. His heart beat faster. He'd never get another chance like this. The car was outside, he could be far away before they even began to suspect that something was wrong. And he'd be free at last, free of all the daily indignities. He eyed the temptation in his hands. So easy.

But that's what he'd be—alone, with all that money. If he took it and ran, how could he ever look Betsy in the eye? He'd probably never see her again, or Howard; he wouldn't dare. And what kind of freedom would that be, cut off from all the family he had?

Jack sighed and shook his head. Maybe Kevin could face that prospect, but he couldn't. Reluctantly but firmly he set the suitcases down by the door and left.

He almost regretted his decision when he got back to the house. Howard and George were waiting for him in the office, and though he'd made good time—it was barely 11:00 now—Howard greeted him with an irascible, "What the devil took you so long?" Then, as always when Jack returned from any errand, Howard sat him down like a schoolboy and quizzed him in exhaustive detail to make sure he hadn't bungled the job.

Kate, having more faith in him perhaps, and also a splitting headache, had long since taken a couple of aspirins and retired to her room. George clearly wished he'd had the sense to do the same. And, at length, he said wearily, "Howard, I really think—"

"Who asked you?" Howard snapped, but it was merely a reflex. The inquisition sputtered to a stop. He'd simply run out of questions. He looked at the note again.

"Within twenty-four hours," he muttered. "Well. I suppose we can't expect any word before morning at the earliest. I've got the phone by my bed, just in case, and Arthur would hear the door. So maybe we'd all better turn in and try to get a little sleep."

They needed no urging. They went quickly upstairs and parted, glad to be rid of one another's company for a while.

Jack was tired, but he wasn't really sleepy. So, once he'd undressed, he went over to his bookshelf to find something to read.

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And there, tucked between two of his own dog-eared volumes, protruding slightly, he saw a worn copy of *The Wind in the Willows*, the very one he'd given Betsy years ago. This unexpected trace of her lifted his spirits, and at the same time saddened him a little. Was she giving it back to him? Putting her childhood forever behind her?

He pulled the book out and regarded it tenderly, remembering all the nights he'd read her a chapter from it at bedtime. Then he opened it, and out fell a letter, this one clearly addressed to him.

"Dear Uncle Jack," it began. "I'm going away to try my luck on my own, the way I said I would. Do you remember?" Jack nodded and smiled. "You may already know about it by the time you find this, because I'm mailing a letter to Daddy. *Please* try to calm him down. And *don't* worry about me. I've got a nice little apartment and, starting Monday, a job! I'm sort of nervous about it, but happy too, because I really want to do this.

"The only thing that bothered me was being completely out of reach of my family. I thought about that a long time and I finally decided that you were the one person I was sure I could trust not to give me away. So if you need to get in touch with me, or just want to now and then, call 528-7231 and ask for Ellen (that's me now). But remember, this is *our secret*. That's why I couldn't mail this to you. I don't want anyone else even to know you have it. I know I can count on you. Love, Betsy."

Jack sat quite still for a moment. Then he let out a long sigh of contentment. And relief. If he'd gone away with that stupid money, he'd have missed this. He read it again, slowly, savoring particularly "you were the one person I was sure I could trust" and "I know I can count on you." And you can, dear child, you can, he silently promised her.

Suddenly he wanted to tell her so, to hear her voice. He leaped up, fired with the notion of getting dressed and going out to a pay phone. A safe phone, he qualified jauntily, pleased with the touch of conspiracy.

Then he looked at the clock and came down to earth. It was long past midnight and she was a working girl. She needed her rest. Besides, he'd hardly know what to say to her with this other matter still unresolved. So, patience, patience. He put the precious letter back in the book and the book back on the shelf.

But sleep was completely out of the question now and Jack no longer felt much like reading. What he did feel like, he decided, was

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something to eat. He donned a robe and went quietly along the hall to the back stairs.

As soon as he started down he saw the kitchen light shining into the pantry. Someone else evidently had the same idea. Oh, well. He hoped it was Kate, but in his present buoyant mood even George or Howard couldn't spoil his appetite.

It was, in fact, none of them. On a stool at the breakfast bar, eating a sandwich and reading the paper, sat Kevin. And Jack's disbelief ballooned to alarm when he caught sight of one of the suitcases brazenly propped against the counter.

Jack hurried over and sat himself on the stool next to Kevin. "Why," he asked, keeping his voice low, "did you come back here?"

Kevin gave him a pained look. "Now that's what I call a real welcome home."

"What I mean is—" Jack glanced uneasily at the suitcase.

"Oh, that." Kevin nodded. "You're right. I meant to go a lot farther and stay a lot longer. Thought maybe I could persuade Dodie McGrath to go with me. But the fair Dorothy had more glamorous plans afoot. A Monday-night flight to Buenos Aires, no less. Going to visit that roommate she had at Vassar, Consuela Something-Something-Something. So I just hung around the McGrath's and gave Dodie the benefit of my advice on what to take and not to take. Then tonight I drove her to the airport. And that, dear teacher, is how I spent my short dull summer vacation."

Jack had stiffened alertly at the mention of Buenos Aires. But it was the McGrath girl who had gone. Kevin was still here. And the suitcase—

Kevin cocked an eyebrow at him. "You know what I think you need? A little nourishment." He cut a slice of beef off the leftover roast, slapped it between two pieces of bread, and handed it to Jack.

"Thanks." Jack took a bite and chewed it thoughtfully. But he still couldn't keep his eyes off the suitcase.

"Why," Kevin asked at last, "are you so fascinated by this suitcase?" He slid to the floor, picked up the case, and placed it on the stool for closer inspection. "It's excellent quality, I'll grant you that. But there are lots more just like it in the luggage room. You know the Cunninghams—nothing but the best and plenty of it."

"But what"—Jack had some difficulty swallowing the bit of sandwich and the dread question came out barely a whisper—"what's in it?"

Kevin's eyes narrowed and he drew back. "Wouldn't you like to

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know?" He gazed speculatively at Jack for a long moment. Then, with sudden decision, he said, "Okay. If you promise not to tell a soul I'll show you." He laid the case flat, released the catches, and opened the top to reveal the neat stacks of—shirts, socks and underwear.

"If I do say so myself," Kevin remarked sardonically as he snapped it shut again, "I pack a rather mean suitcase." He tossed it down, hopped back on the stool, and turned to face Jack. "All right now. *What* is this all about?"

Jack shook his head helplessly. "I can't tell you," he said, and it was the truth in more ways than one.

"That sounds ominous. Must be something I did."

"No." Jack looked at Kevin in mute apology for all his suspicions. "No, Kevin, I don't think it has anything at all to do with you."

"Well, that's a relief. But God Almighty!" Kevin ran his hand through his hair. "It's just a crisis a minute in this crazy house. I don't blame Briggsy for wanting to take her vacation early. After the blowup Saturday, she's entitled."

"Yes." Jack sighed. "She always bears the brunt of it."

"And for once," Kevin went on, "she isn't going to visit that dreary cousin of hers in Upper Petunia or wherever it is."

"Oh? Where's she going this year?"

Kevin bounced off the stool, executed a couple of flamenco steps, snapped his fingers, and shouted, "South America, take it away!"

"How do you know that?"

"I ran into her. Tonight, at the airport. Didn't I mention that? She was on the same flight as Dodie. And, believe me, she looked like a million."

"I'll bet she did," Jack murmured as he slid off the stool and headed upstairs.

Kate's room was empty, of course—empty of her and empty of the two suitcases she'd had "packed for a week." And whatever they were filled with now, it wasn't clothing, as her full closet attested.

Newspapers, that's what, Jack thought. He laughed a little ruefully. He'd carried them twice for her, once up to this room and later in two suitcases out to Laurel Cottage—where, he hadn't the slightest doubt, they still stood unclaimed.

To her credit, Kate had arranged to relieve their suspense early. At 7 A.M. sharp, courtesy once more of the trusty A-One, her third communication arrived. This one was typed and businesslike and was clipped to the remainder of Betsy's letter to Howard.

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"Dear Howard," Kate wrote, "As you will see by the attached letter, Betsy was not kidnaped.

"On Saturday it was trenchantly brought home to me that I had no future in this house. I was, therefore, in a state of some bitterness when I came across Betsy's letter in the morning mail. This may explain why I succumbed to curiosity and opened it. (For the record, I never before opened any of your personal mail.) I had already made up my mind to leave your employ, and when I read of Betsy's adventure, I saw how I could do so in style. I decided, you might say, to extract a rather larger than usual severance pay. I like to think it was not entirely unearned.

"I wish you well, and I hope that in time you may find it in your heart to wish me the same. Sincerely yours, Kate Briggs."

George and Jack, routed from their beds for the occasion, watched Howard with wary concern.

He didn't roar or bellow or carry on. He just sat there, the wind knocked out of his sails.

"Well, the important thing," George finally ventured to remind him, "is that Betsy wasn't kidnaped."

"Oh, yes . . . yes, of course." But the words came out like a sigh. Howard seemed utterly depleted.

And no wonder, thought Jack with a guilty pang. Jack had known all along about Betsy, but for 24 grueling hours Howard had truly believed she was in peril. Jack could see now that, beneath all that testiness and bluster, he must have been so worried about her. Absently, Jack let the thought drift into words: "You must have been so worried about her."

And that, oddly enough, got a rise out of Howard. He could not abide sympathy. Pehaps he found it demeaning. He scowled at Jack, and with a little of the old snap, retorted, "Well, of course I was worried. She's my daughter, isn't she?"

No, she's not, Jack answered him silently. She's mine. But that was something he'd take good care never to say aloud.

"Q"

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An incident in the life of a great man . . .

IN OLD VIENNA

by EDWARD WELLEN

What was that noise? I hear only silence now. I must have snored myself awake. I fell asleep with the lamp still burning. Is it day, is it night? I could fix the hour by analysis, by seeing how much oil is spent. But it's simpler to stand up, stretch, and open the curtains.

Day. Sometimes darkness is more esthetic. The beautiful blue Danube is far from blue and beautiful by the time it passes through Vienna. Life is—how shall I couch it?—life is like a baby's shirt, short and dirty.

Strange dream I had. Catch it before it slips away. I saw myself in a dust storm, the dust piling up and burying me much as the sand half buried the Sphinx. But I found shelter in the pouch of a kangaroo.

What does it mean? Hardly complex. A wish to return to the womb. It means that Vienna is not all waltzes and whipped cream, that life is often too demanding, that I wish I could escape the bills falling due today.

Luckily, I have the wherewithal, the payment from my grateful patient. Yes, but where is it? I know I put the banknote in a safe place. Trouble is, it's so safe I can't remember . . . Ah, yes. Under the rug. Just lift the corner and—*gone!*

It would seem someone stole into my study while I dozed. But who? The maid? One of the children, for a prank? A housebreaker? A patient? Even my dear wife?

No, that is going too far. I know so much about the kinks of human nature that there is no one not suspect—not even myself. Still, we must face these things. Know thyself. Light up a cigar and free-associate.

Smoke . . . dust . . . my dream . . . the dust storm . . . the kangaroo's pouch . . . of course!

Unconsciously, I must have remembered that today the maid

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whisks through my study and that, as always, she will lift the corner of the rug to sweep dust under it. I must have thought to remove temptation. So I retrieved the banknote and put it in a safer place. My vest pocket. Yes, here it is.

Life is—how shall I couch it?—life is like a baby's smile . . .

An incident in the life of a great king . . .

IN ANCIENT JERUSALEM

by EDWARD WELLEN

SOLOMON: A test of wits is better than wine. The Queen of Sheba has posed a nice challenge—that I pick her out from among her maidservants. How to find a lily among lilies? All wear veils and concealing robes. All are of a size and of a shapelessness. That one stands proudest, but Sheba's too cunning to give herself away thus. Can I sniff her out? This one alone is scented with rare ointment, but again Sheba's too sly. I could snap out her name—*Balkis!*—but she's too clever and strong-willed to give a start. Still, quickness of thought and firmness of mind are no match for habit. I'll thunder one word—and see who's slowest to obey. *"Kneel!"*

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a *NEW* Dr. Basil Willing story by

HELEN McCLOY

Dr. Basil Willing is the psychiatric consultant to the Boston police. The connection brings Dr. Willing many cases, but they are always objective investigations—that is, they concern people not emotionally close to Dr. Willing. This time the case, which the doctor doesn't like to talk about and would like to forget, involves his daughter Gisela and his grandson Peter—and the only clue is an out-of-this-world doodle on a telephone memo pad . . .

THAT BUG THAT'S GOING AROUND

by HELEN McCLOY

In most of Dr. Basil Willing's murder cases the essential clue has been some scrap of rare information. One exception is a case that began when he was visiting his married daughter in Lincoln. He solved it with scraps of knowledge so common that they were accessible to everybody who bothered to read newspapers.

He doesn't like to talk about this case. Some aspects of it were so disturbing that he would like to forget the whole thing.

It started on a perfect June day—blue sky, warm sun, cool breeze scented with roses. When Basil got out of his car, he saw the front door standing open.

"Gisela?"

No answer. Yet she had been so urgent on the telephone. "Alan has to go to Washington. He's testifying before that Senate Committee on pollution. Friends of his are coming to dinner. I can't get anyone to take his place. Can you?"

"Delighted. People I know?"

"I don't think so. One of them is Jason Blair. He's in Boston for

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a convention of microbiologists at the Forum Hotel."

"Nobel Prize?"

"That's the one. They say he's a primadonna, but, after all, he did discover chemical Darwinism."

"What's that?"

"Oh, father, you must know. Alan says it's the genetic basis for inherited response mechanisms."

"Sounds more like Lamarck than Darwin." Ever since Gisela had married a microbiologist, Basil had had trouble keeping up with theory in that field. "Who else is coming?"

"Blair's wife, Nancy. Philip Keene, a science writer who's writing a biography of Blair, and Dorothy Lyons, who helped Blair with chemical Darwinism."

"No Nobel Prize for her?"

"There's been some talk about that . . ."

When Basil walked around the house, he saw Gisela coming out of the woods with an armful of wildflowers. Her little son, Peter, was trudging behind her.

Basil could not look at his daughter without seeing her dead mother. There were the same wide dark eyes, the same cloud of fine black hair.

"Hello, Peter."

As a rule the boy ran into his grandfather's arms. Now he didn't even smile.

"Something wrong with Peter?"

"A cold, I'm afraid."

Basil took the flowers from Gisela so she could pick up the boy. His arms went around her neck and he snuggled his cheek against hers. "I'm sleepy, mommy."

Half an hour later she came downstairs, carrying a tray. "He wouldn't eat supper and he went to sleep right away. That usually means fever. Will you take a look at him?"

"Isn't anyone else around? You know I feel strongly about doctors being emotionally involved with patients."

"But this is only a cold."

"There are a lot of things besides colds that start with fever and a runny nose."

"Then I'll ask Dr. Prescott to drop in."

She sat down at the telephone table in the hall and dialed a number. Waiting for an answer, she picked up the pen on the table and began to draw faces on the memorandum pad, some smiling,

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some serious. She had a knack of bringing faces to life on paper with a few strokes of the pen.

"You're lucky to have a doctor who still makes house calls," said Basil.

"He's new. Once he's settled, he'll probably fall back on the good old formula: *No need for me to see him, Mrs. Shipley. It's just that bug that's going around.*"

Dr. Prescott arrived an hour later. "Hullo-ullo-ullo, young feller-me-lad! Scaring the living daylights out of your mom, eh?" He shook down his thermometer without telling them what it registered. "A little fever never hurt any kid." He winked at Peter. "Bet you know that even if mom doesn't. Tough guy, aren't you?" He made a feint with one fist as if he were going to sock Peter on the jaw. "You'll be playing football one of these days, eh?"

Peter was silent. Basil decided that Dr. Prescott could not have children of his own. If he had, he would know how quick they are to detect insincerity.

At the door he paused. "Nothing to worry about, Mrs. Shipley. It's just that bug that's going around."

An hour later Peter was moaning with pain. His temperature had gone up two degrees above Gisela's last reading.

She looked at her father defiantly. "I don't care about medical etiquette. I'm going to call Dr. Yule. He's retired now, but he's friendly. I think he'll come, if I ask him to."

When the doorbell rang a few minutes later, Gisela ran to the door. "Dr. Yule, I—oh—good evening." Jason Blair had been on television so often that Basil recognized him at once, a tall meaty man with a salesman's smile. "Mrs. Shipley?"

"Dr. Blair, I must apologize for my husband's absence. He was called to Washington suddenly. This is my father, Dr. Basil Willing."

"Basil Willing? I've wanted to meet you ever since I read your first book, *Time and Mentality*."

Most people remembered Basil's last book. How clever of Blair to remember a first book.

Blair's color was high, his breath shallow. Heavy drinking catching up with him? Or something else?

A man and woman stood beside him. "My wife, Nancy, and Philip Keene, who's doing my biography."

Nancy Blair stepped into the light. Hair that had looked blonde in shadow became gray. Her face was scarred with a cobweb of fine

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wrinkles, but her lipstick was still the bright red that girls had worn in the forties.

Philip Keene was one of those New York youths who make Boston boys look dowdy. His jeans were ironed, his jogging shoes unscuffed. His immaculately white sports shirt bore the tiny inevitable alligator.

"Thanks for letting me tag along, Mrs. Shipley."

Another woman stepped out of the shadow. "Forgotten me again, Jason?" Her face was narrow, her hair an unfortunate shade of carrot. Her right hand was encased in a plaster cast shaped like a hoof. "I'm Dorothy Lyons."

Blair protested. "Now, really, Dotty—"

"Dorothy. I don't like Dotty. Did you forget? Or did you remember only too well?"

"My dear Dorothy, it was wholly inadvertent. A mere slip—"

"Slip my foot." Her tone made the words a challenge. "Dr. Willing will tell you that a slip of the tongue is never inadvertent."

Keene tried to protect Blair. "Let's talk about something else."

"What?"

"This epidemic, for one thing."

"Epidemic?" cried Gisela.

Basil slipped his hand into hers and held it firmly.

"Perhaps that's too strong a word. I mean this outbreak of flu or whatever it is at our hotel."

"I haven't seen anything about it in the newspapers," said Gisela.

"Of course not." Blair played the role of sophisticate enlightening the masses with aplomb. "The Forum doesn't want to go the way of the Bellevue Stratford in Philadelphia, but I doubt if they can keep the lid on this much longer. It's bad enough when a micro-organism runs amok at a convention of American Legionnaires, but imagine any bug daring to do so at a convention of microbiologists. Can't you hear the cries of: 'Virologist, heal thyself?' "

They were in the living room when the doorbell rang again.

Gisela rose. "That must be the doctor for my son."

When she had left the room, Blair looked at Basil. "What's wrong with her son?"

"Some form of flu apparently."

"Oops! I did put my foot in it, didn't I?"

"Is there anything we can do?" asked Nancy Blair.

"Not really. This is just a buffet supper. I'm sure Gisela would not want you to wait for her."

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They had got as far as salmon with sorrel sauce when someone came downstairs. Basil excused himself and went into the hall.

A man sat at the telephone table, dialing a number. He looked just the way Basil expected an old-fashioned general practitioner to look—experienced, conscientious, compassionate.

"Dr. Yule? I'm Mrs. Shipley's father."

"Just a moment, please." Yule spoke into the telephone. "I want a prescription filled. How late are you open? . . . Good. I'll pick it up myself." He put down the telephone. "Dr. Willing, isn't it?"

"You look tired. Let me drive you."

"I'd be glad if you would. I've had a long day."

In the car Basil plucked up his nerve to ask, "How is Peter?"

"He's a pretty sick boy. At this stage there's no way of telling just what it is. I'm going to try tetracycline. It may help and it can't hurt."

"Have you heard anything about an epidemic at the Forum Hotel?"

"It was on the six o'clock news tonight. There have been five deaths. The hotel can't hush it up any longer."

Five deaths. Basil flinched inwardly, but he kept his voice steady. "One of our guests tonight, Dr. Blair, is staying at that hotel."

"Do you mean Jason Blair? He and I are old friends, but I haven't seen him for years. Philip Keene has asked me to check his book on Blair for factual error. I'm trying, but it's hard to remember things that happened so long ago."

Peter took his capsule obediently. Too obediently. A little rebellion is healthy.

Gisela refused her father's offer to bring her supper. "I couldn't eat anything. Alan called while you were out. There have been five deaths at the hotel and two in the suburbs. He's flying home tonight. I'm going to stay with Peter. Will you apologize to Dr. Blair and the others for me?"

Basil turned to Yule. "Have you thought about a hospital?"

"Children are happier at home. Let's see how he gets through the night."

Downstairs in the hall Yule hesitated. "I suppose I ought to speak to Jason now."

The supper party had moved back into the living room with coffee and liqueurs.

"Have we been having telephone calls!" cried Keene when he saw

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Basil. "Jason left this number at the hotel. Now everyone who heard the news on TV this evening is having kittens—my mother, Dorothy's brother, Nancy's cousins. What's all this about five deaths at the Forum?"

Blair was sprawled on the sofa, nursing a glass of brandy, obviously not his first. "Never believe any-anything you hear on TV."

Dorothy Lyons sat beside him, holding a glass of *crème de menthe* awkwardly in her left hand. "You think it's just this bug that's going around?"

Yule spoke quietly. "Jason."

The glass slipped from Blair's hand and rolled across the floor, spilling brandy. He struggled to his feet. "Frank."

His head fell forward, his knees buckled, he pitched to the floor and lay still.

Yule was the first to reach him. "I can't find a heartbeat. He's dead."

A cry broke from Keene. "Dead? You mean murdered."

"Philip . . ." Nancy Blair's voice was thin. "Why? Why?"

"You all hated him. Now we're going to find out which one of you hated him enough to kill him."

Lieutenant Meyers of the State Police was assigned to the District Attorney's office in Middlesex County. He had heard all about Basil's work as psychiatric consultant to the Boston police.

"Is this guy Keene a nut case?" demanded Meyers.

They were sitting in the little study Alan used when he brought paperwork home.

"I wish you'd talk to him and tell me what you think. He's babbling all over the shop about murder, but our doctor says Blair died of the same bug that has already killed five people at the Forum Hotel. You were an eyewitness to his death. Did you see any evidence of murder?"

Basil did not want to share his theories with anyone at this stage of the case, but he had been trained never to withhold facts from the police; so he pushed the only tangible fact he had across the desk to Meyers.

"What's this?"

"A memorandum pad from the telephone table in the hall. Those faces were drawn by my daughter, Gisela Shipley, while she was telephoning before dinner. That other doodle, at the bottom of the page, wasn't there at the time and it isn't hers. You can see it's not

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her impressionist style. More like an engineer's drawing, exact and explicit. Do you recognize it?"

Basil did not say whether or not he himself had recognized it because he was not sure he had. There were some things about it he had never seen anywhere before.

Meyers studied the drawing. "Two cylinders, one above the other, connected by a slim waist. Hard to recognize a thing like that out of context. It could be almost any part of any small machine. Who used the telephone after your daughter?"

"Practically everybody. Nancy Blair, Dorothy Lyons, Philip Keene, and Dr. Yule."

"You think this drawing might tell us something about Blair's murderer? If there is a murderer?"

"It was drawn just before Blair died," answered Basil. "Doodling is motor automatism. Half the time the doodler pays no conscious attention to what he's drawing. This makes the drawing itself a clue to what is going on in his unconscious mind. If we could find out what this is, it might throw some light on what happened."

Meyers looked at the drawing again. "It tapers to a needle point at the bottom. Hypodermic?"

"Would a hypodermic have all those wires or filaments sprouting in every direction?"

"I guess not. By the way, why is Miss Lyons wearing a cast on one hand tonight?"

"A minor car accident. Nothing sinister."

Philip Keene met Basil in the study with a chip on his shoulder. His glance at the drawing was perfunctory. "Some kind of watchman's whistle?"

There was only one thing he wanted to talk about: Blair. "A genius, Dr. Willing, surrounded by fools who hated him."

"Even his wife?"

"Most of all his wife. Their only child died while they were in Sweden getting that Nobel Prize. Even after all these years, Nancy blames Jason. He made her go with him, he made her leave the child at home, and the people he picked to look after the child while they were away neglected her. Dorothy's reason for hating Jason is simpler: he got the Nobel Prize and she didn't. She rationalizes this by telling everybody Jason cheated her out of it."

"Yet they all came here together this evening?"

"I got them together. These feuds aren't doing Jason any good. I thought I might induce them to patch things up before the book

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came out, but it didn't work."

"How could Blair cheat her out of a Nobel Prize?"

"Timing. She says he let her think they were working together as a research team, so she gave him all her data. She claims she had no idea he was holding back his data from her until he published his first report in *Nature*, using all her material without mentioning her name. She says he wrecked her career and he would never have got away with it if she had been a man. That's for the birds. It didn't hurt her career. She had a good job with NASA in the sixties and now she's making real money researching for a pharmaceutical house."

"If you were a scientist, which would you prefer, real money or a Nobel Prize?"

"Dr. Willing, you have a bias against poor old Jason. Will you read my biography so you can see for yourself what he was really like? I've got a set of proofs out in the car."

"I'll take a quick look at them tonight if I have time. Who else had a grudge against Blair?"

"I can't think of anyone else—unless it's Yule."

"Dr. Yule? He told me he and Blair were old friends."

Keene smiled unpleasantly. "Old friends often means old enemies. Blair and Yule were Navy doctors together during the war and went into genetic research together afterward. Then Blair married Nancy, got the prize, and landed a big job for himself in California. Yule stayed here in the East, doing some sort of research for the Army. When that ended in 1972, he came out here to Lincoln as a general practitioner."

"A failure of nerve?"

"Something like that. It's hard for a second-class mind to keep up with a first-class mind. Yule just wasn't Blair's 'weight' as a scientist."

"So your idea that Blair was murdered rests on just one thing: motive?"

"My idea that Blair was murdered rests on the fact that an epidemic is the best possible coverup for a murder, like hiding a leaf in a forest."

Ten years ago Basil would have laughed. Now he sat still and thought about letter-bombs in the mail and passenger jets hijacked in mid-air and gun battles in the street. Today's killer was prepared to sacrifice any innocent bystander.

Basil found Meyers in the kitchen where some of his men were

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taking samples of the food and drink served at dinner. "No," he answered Basil's question. "We still don't know what form of flu this is or even if it is flu. I've called CDC, the Center for Disease Control in Atlanta. They're flying a man up here now. The newspapers call him a 'disease detective.' "

The house was unnaturally quiet after the police had gone. At Basil's suggestion Nancy Blair and Dorothy Lyons took over a guest room on the ground floor while Philip Keene made a place for himself to sleep on the couch in the study.

Before Nancy and Dorothy went to bed, Basil showed them the drawing on the memorandum pad.

"A pencil sharpener?" suggested Nancy. "With a pencil sharpened to a needle point?"

"How big is it supposed to be?" asked Dorothy. "There's no background to give us a sense of scale. Those cylinders could be some sort of bomb or—"

"Or what?"

Basil was sure she had suddenly recognized the thing. He was equally sure she was not going to tell him what it was.

"Or a geometrical abstraction," she went on smoothly. "Isn't abstract drawing the commonest form of doodle? Circles or triangles?"

She was watching him as closely as he was watching her. "Thought of something, Dr. Willing?"

"Yes."

"You look as if it were something horrible."

"It is. Good night, Miss Lyons."

Alone in the living room, he began skimming through the early chapters of Blair's biography. Things were beginning to fall into place and he didn't like the pattern they were forming. It was almost a relief when, once more, the doorbell rang.

A young man stood on the threshold. "Dr. Willing? I'm Jonathan Pinckney from CDC in Atlanta."

The trace of southern speech took Basil back to student years at Johns Hopkins.

"Come into the dining room where no one can hear us. Drink?"

"Thanks, but not right now. I'd like to ask you some questions. Has your little grandson had any contact with the Forum Hotel?"

"His father was at meeting of the convention there four days ago. Now let me ask you something. Is this a germ or a virus or what?"

Pinckney grinned. "I'm afraid it's a what. We have no name for

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it yet. The papers just call it the 'Forum Hotel disease.' "

"Nice for the hotel."

"But inevitable. All we really know about this thing is that it's been found in the bodies of everyone who died or fell ill at the Forum Hotel in the last few days. Apparently it started in the air-conditioning system."

"Human agency?"

"Possibly, but where could anyone get hold of a micro-organism as bizarre as this? It's different in morphology and everything else from anything I've ever seen before."

"A new strain of virus?"

"More like a new species that violates all the laws of evolution by appearing too suddenly."

"Can't a new species appear on earth suddenly?" asked Basil. "I thought all nature needed was a few mutants and a small gene pool."

"Not as suddenly as this," insisted Pinckney. "What would you think if you came across the modern horse in a world where there was no trace of any earlier model like eohippus? All links are missing. The thing is a monster, literally out of this world. Take a look."

Pinckney lifted a micro-photo out of his briefcase and placed it on the dining table. "Ever see anything like that before?"

"Yes."

Pinckney frowned. "You must be mistaken, Dr. Willing. I and my staff are the only people who have ever seen this thing."

Basil took the little telephone pad out of his pocket and put it down on the dining table beside the micro-photo. Drawing and photo were mirror-images of one another in every detail.

It was several seconds before Pinckney could find his voice again. "Where did you get this drawing?"

Basil told him the whole story. "I suspected it was a portrait of a micro-organism, but I couldn't be sure because it had so many peculiar features I had never seen in any living thing before. I'm sure Dorothy Lyons recognized it as a possible micro-monster, but she wouldn't admit it."

"Why not?"

"She must have suspected it was the murder weapon. One way you can incriminate yourself in a murder case is by showing undue familiarity with the weapon."

"Then why did the murderer leave that telltale drawing of the weapon on a memorandum pad?"

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"He didn't consciously. Doodling is like a nervous tic, an involuntary symptom of stress. This drawing tells us two things the murderer wanted to hide. He is someone who knows something about microbiology and he used the telephone in the hall this evening."

"That doesn't eliminate anyone," said Pinckney. "They all used the telephone this evening and they all know something about microbiology, Lyons and Yule as professionals, Keene and Nancy Blair as a science writer and a scientist's wife."

"Can you think how any of them could get hold of anything as out of this world as a new species?"

"Out of this world . . ." repeated Pinckney. "Did you know that Dorothy Lyons worked for NASA in the sixties?"

"Yes. I wonder if we're thinking along the same lines. If there's any chance we are, we'd better have that drink now." Basil brought a decanter and glasses from the sideboard to the table. "Well?"

"Do I have to take the plunge?" Pinckney grinned. "It's going to sound impossible."

"In a world where men have walked on the moon, nothing is impossible." Basil took a swallow of whiskey and went on. "1969 was the year astronauts came back from the moon. Most people have forgotten now that they were subjected to quarantine when they splashed down in the Pacific. They were scrubbed with decontaminants and encased in BIGs, Biologically Isolated Garments with hoods and masks. They were then hurried into a MQF, Mobile Quarantine Facility, and flown to Houston. They remained in quarantine for eighteen days, communicating with the outside world only through microphones and glass windows."

"And quite right, too," said Pinckney. "Without all that, we might have died like flies. It's taken us several million years to evolve immunity to earth-born organisms and any others that may reach us here from space. Do you know the origin of the Italian word 'influenza'? It means an influence from the stars."

"I like that idea," said Basil. "I never could believe in space travelers like ourselves, but I can believe in silent, invisible micro-astronauts smaller than seed, finer than pollen, tougher than spores, who don't need spaceships because they can survive all extremes of heat, cold, and distance."

"But," said Pinckney. "How did they get into the air-conditioning system at the Forum Hotel?"

"Suppose there was a young woman with a brilliantly creative,

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scientific mind, who was harassed, snubbed, and finally cheated by a male scientist with a bad case of gynephobia.

"Lise Meitner was forced to study physics in a room by herself because she was female and other students were male. Dorothy Lyons was not subjected to anything so extreme, but she did have to endure constant nagging, discrimination, and belittling. That gets under your skin in time no matter how hard you try to pretend to yourself and others that you don't care."

"And let's suppose she works for NASA in Houston in 1969," added Pinckney. "Where she discovers an alien micro-organism in the hundred pounds of moon-rock brought back from the moon. She keeps the discovery to herself because she wants to experiment freely without a boss like Blair laying down rules and taking all the glory. One question: why in hell did she wait ten years to kill Blair?"

"Maybe she was never quite sure Blair had cheated her until she read Keene's book in proof and—"

Basil came to a full stop.

"And what?"

"We forgot something. Back to square one. Dorothy Lyons is right-handed. I noticed how awkwardly she held her liqueur glass in her left hand this evening, but she had to because her right hand was wrapped in a plaster cast. She couldn't even pick up a pen tonight, let alone make a drawing as precise as the one on the telephone pad."

"It was a fascinating theory." Pinckney sighed. "Where else, if not in space, could anyone find a micro-organism that seems out of this world? Until we answer that question, we can't solve the case."

When Pinckney had gone, Basil opened the door to Peter's room quietly. Gisela had fallen asleep in her chair. He moved carefully so he would make no sound to wake her. He leaned over Peter and saw the most blessed sight in the world, drops of sweat along the hairline. The fever had broken.

He didn't wake Gisela. Good news will always keep and she needed rest. He dropped the lightest of kisses on her hair and slipped out of the room.

Downstairs, he looked at his watch. One o'clock. Too late to call Yule now, but how glad he would be in the morning when—

It was then the truth hit Basil.

He still needed the answer to one question. Whom could he call

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at this hour? Meyers? Pinckney? No, Alan's boss. The man had insomnia. He was always wide-awake until two or three in the morning.

Basil dialed and listened to the distant ringing of a telephone. Suppose Alan had exaggerated. Suppose the man didn't have insomnia . . .

But he did. "That's an intriguing question, Dr. Willing. I hope you will tell me all about this some day. The answer is: Yes, until 1976. You know, of course, what happened that year . . . No, they didn't ask him to resign. It was his own idea."

Basil put the telephone down. It rang immediately.

"Dr. Willing?" Yule's voice was hoarse and hesitant. "I . . . I've picked up the bug myself . . . I'm alone here . . . I must get to Charles Street Hospital . . . lines busy . . . could you telephone?"

"I can get you there faster than an ambulance that has to come out from Boston first. How do I find your house?"

"When you come to 117, turn right . . . next left is Orchard Lane . . . my house . . . second on right."

Basil ran out to his car.

Yule heard him on the porch and called out, "This way . . . door's open."

He was in bed. The change in him was shocking. His eyeballs had sunk deep under the bony ridges of his brows. His face had become a tragic mask, every line going down.

The most frightening thing about a murderer is that he usually looks and talks just like everybody else. What had Basil thought when he first saw Yule? *Experienced, conscientious, compassionate.* You see what you expect to see.

Yule was muttering. "Won't dress . . . coat over pajamas." His eyes met Basil's. His face changed. "You . . . know . . ."

"I know now. You almost killed my grandson."

"How did you find out?" Yule's voice grew stronger. "Some scrap of rare information no one else could possibly know about? Isn't that how you solve your murder cases, Dr. Willing?"

"Not this time. This one was solved largely by scraps of common knowledge familiar to everybody who reads newspapers. If you had not left that sketch on the telephone pad, I might not have suspected you at all. It looked like a micro-organism, but it was unlike any I had ever seen or read about. Where could such a strange mutant come from?

"At first I could think only of outer space. Then I remembered

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biological warfare. Before 1972 the Army had a research laboratory at Fort Detrick where they used gene-splitting technics to manufacture living weapons, disease-carrying mutants more lethal than any ever seen on earth before. What other job could a micro-biologist like you have with the Army at that time?"

"It's easy enough to fill in that bare outline. When the Army made the civilized decision to shut down such projects, you could not bear to destroy what you had created. Few artists could. So you took your own little project with you secretly when you left Detrick. Everything there was top secret. That must have helped you conceal what you were doing. If subordinates asked questions, you could always say, 'Sorry, you don't have clearance for this.'

"I did wonder how you had managed to get hold of an electron microscope after you left Detrick. Then I remembered that some doctors combine a small general practice with part-time research. I called a man who would know if you had done that and he said you had. He also told me you gave up all genetic research in 1976, the year scientists themselves became concerned with the biohazards of recombinant DNA, the year National Institutes of Health began laying down guidelines for genetic responsibility.

"Of course you could never publish what you discovered after you left Detrick, but you didn't care. You had the true scientist's lust to know. Knowledge itself was your reward, not fame or money. Unfortunately you combined this with the Nazi scientist's inhumanity.

"I don't suppose you thought of killing Blair until you read Keene's biography and understood for the first time that he had cheated you as well as Dorothy Lyons out of your share of a Nobel Prize. It was one thing to refrain voluntarily from publishing your secret work. It was quite another thing to find out that your public work had been suppressed by an old rival and enemy.

"The temptation to murder Blair became irresistible when you realized that you had the perfect murder weapon, a deadly microorganism whose very existence was unknown to everyone but yourself."

"No judge or jury will believe this nonsense," cried Yule. "Blair died suddenly and naturally, the effect of disease and alcohol on a degenerate heart."

"Blair died suddenly because it was a shock for him to meet you, his old enemy, so unexpectedly in a stranger's house, but he wouldn't have died at all if you hadn't infected the air-conditioning system at his hotel with something completely unnatural.

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"The horrible thing is that you would have got away with it if I hadn't recognized a doodle on a telephone pad as an impossible micro-organism. Once I associated that with newspaper stories about Fort Detrick, the rest was easy.

Hate radiated from Yule now like heat from a furnace. "You can't prove a thing. I did get away with it. I . . ."

His voice trickled into silence.

After a few moments Basil telephoned Lieutenant Meyers and left the house to wait for the police outside.

NEXT MONTH . . .

11 ***NEW*** stories—including

EDWARD D. HOCH (about Rand)

HUGH PENTECOST (about Jericho)

JACK RITCHIE (about Henry Turnbuckle)

ROBERT L. FISH (about Schlock Homes)

BILL PRONZINI (about a black wind)

DAVID ELY (about the marked man)

and a complete short novel by

REX STOUT (about Nero Wolfe)

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a *NEW* Dr. Sam Hawthorne story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

Dr. Sam Hawthorne, retired New England general practitioner, turns another page in the diary of his memory-book and recalls a visit he made to Boston in '28, to attend a medical convention. And wherever old Doc Sam went, murder was sure to follow or precede him. This time it was a series of killings on Boston Common, and although the murders were committed in early evening and the Common was filled with plainclothes police, the murderer remained absolutely "invisible." But "impossible crimes," as you know, are Dr. Sam Hawthorne's specialty . . .

THE PROBLEM OF THE BOSTON COMMON

by EDWARD D. HOCH

It was a warm summer's afternoon and old Dr. Sam Hawthorne was pouring a bit of sherry at a little table on the back lawn, obviously enjoying the opportunity to be out of doors. "The air is so clear and fresh today," he commented. "When I was young it used to be like this all the time, even in the cities. Sometimes folks ask me if I ever solved an impossible crime in the city, and there were a couple over the years when business of some sort took me away from Northmont. The first one—a terrifying case—happened in Boston, in the late spring of 1928 . . ."

I'd gone to Boston with my nurse April (Dr. Sam continued), to attend a New England medical convention. It was my first opportunity to take a long drive in my new car—a tan Packard Runabout that had replaced my beloved Pierce-Arrow. Though the roads weren't nearly as good as they are today we made the drive in under

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two hours, and I was quite pleased with the Packard's performance. It was warm enough to ride with the top down, which April especially enjoyed. Some years back I'd taken her with me to an engagement party up at Newburyport and she still talked about the excitement of that auto trip. Now she was equally excited as we drove up to the fancy hotel facing the Boston Common and the uniformed doorman hurried over to help us with our bags.

"Are you here for the medical convention, sir?" he asked.

"That's right. Dr. Sam Hawthorne from Northmont."

"Go right in and register at the desk. The bellman will take your bags and I'll park the car for you."

The first person we encountered in the lobby was gray-haired Dr. Craig Somerset, vice-chairman of the New England Medical Association. "Well, Sam Hawthorne! How've you been? How're things out in the country?"

"Fine, Craig. Good to see you again. This is my nurse, April. I brought her along to see the sights while I'm involved in all those dull meetings."

His look made April blush at once, but Craig Somerset was always the New England gentleman. "Nice to meet you, April. I hope you'll enjoy our city."

"I haven't been to Boston in ten years," she told him. "It's changed so much!"

"It has that," Dr. Somerset agreed. "This hotel wasn't even here ten years ago. There's a great view of the Common from the upper floors. A word of caution, though—don't walk across the Common in the early evening. We've had some trouble here in recent weeks."

"What sort of trouble?" I asked, assuming he spoke for April's benefit. "Someone molesting women?"

"More serious than that, I'm afraid." The lightness had gone out of his voice. "Three people have been murdered there, all in the early evening while it was still daylight. The killer seems to be absolutely invisible."

"I'll bet Dr. Sam could catch him," April said. "He's solved the most impossible-soundin' crimes you ever did hear of, back in Northmont."

"No, no," I protested. "I'm here for the convention, nothing more."

"And I want to talk to you about that," Somerset said. "I'd like you to fill a little gap in our program the day after tomorrow and speak to us on the problems of country medicine."

"I'm no public speaker, Craig."

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"But you could do a fine job. It's an area of medicine most of these men know nothing about."

"Let me think about it overnight."

"How were the people killed?" April persisted, her curiosity aroused.

"It seems they were poisoned by a quick-acting substance injected into the skin," Somerset said. "The police are trying not to alarm the public, but I was called in as a consultant on the poison question."

"Back in Northmont I swear Sheriff Lens calls on Dr. Sam as much to solve crimes as the sick folk call on him to get healed."

"You're embarrassing me, April."

I'd completed the registration forms by that time and I could see the bellman waiting to show us up to our rooms. "We'll see you later, Craig."

In the elevator April remarked, "He thinks you brought me 'cause I'm your girl, Dr. Sam." Even the words made her blush.

"We won't worry about what he thinks." April was in her thirties, a few years older than me, and she'd been my nurse since I came to Northmont in 1922. She'd lost some weight since those earlier days but she was still a plain-looking country woman. I'd never thought about her romantically, though I did enjoy her company.

"Are you going to solve the murders for them?"

"No, I'm here to attend a medical convention."

But events were working against me. That evening, shortly after eight, the invisible killer claimed his fourth victim.

Dr. Somerset came to my door around 8:30, looking quite alarmed. "We'd like your help, Sam. There's been another killing."

"On the Common?"

"Yes, right across the street! Can you come down?"

I sighed. "Give me five minutes."

We crossed the street in silence to a spot just inside the Common where the body of a young woman lay sprawled against a tree. The police were busy photographing the scene, using flash powder in the beginning dusk. A burly detective who seemed to be in charge came over to us. "Is this your great sleuth, Dr. Somerset?"

"This is Sam Hawthorne, a physician from Northmont. He's here for the convention, and I understand he's had great success solving seemingly impossible crimes back home. Sam, this is Inspector Darnell."

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I could see right away that this was no Sheriff Lens. Darnell was a big-city cop who obviously resented interference, especially from a country doctor. "Do you use a magnifying glass, Doc? Want to crawl around on the ground like Sherlock Holmes?"

"To tell you the truth I want to go back to my room."

Dr. Somerset was exasperated. "Look, Inspector, will it do any harm to tell Sam what you've got so far? He just might come up with an idea."

"Hell, we've tried everything else. What we've got now are four dead bodies. Two men, two women. This last one seems to be the youngest so far. One of the men was a drifter who panhandled in the park. Another was a young lawyer on his way home after working late at the office. Then there was a middle-aged woman out for a stroll in the early evening. And now this one."

"All poisoned?"

The detective nodded. "That's how Dr. Somerset got in on it. We needed a doctor's advice on the kind of poison. The autopsy showed the first three died of minute injections of curare, the South American arrow poison. That fact hasn't been released to the papers yet."

"Curare? On the Boston Common?" It was hard for me to believe. Even in medical school the subject of curare poisoning had been barely touched on. It wasn't something the average doctor ever encountered.

"Curare acts within a few minutes in humans, paralyzing the motor and respiratory muscles," Dr. Somerset explained. "The speed of death seems to depend somewhat on the size of the victim. A thousand-pound ox took forty-five minutes to die from curare in an experiment described in Charles Waterton's book *Wanderings in South America*."

"You know a lot more about curare than I do," I admitted.

"That's why I was called in by Inspector Darnell." He was staring down at the dead young woman. "It's a particularly insidious poison for the killer to use, because there is no pain and very little warning to the victim. There is some double vision and inability to swallow, then asphyxiation as lung muscles are affected. Admittedly it's a painless death, but it's also one that gives the victim no opportunity to call for help."

"How was the poison administered?" I asked. "With a hypodermic needle?"

Inspector Darnell knelt by the body and turned back the collar of the dead woman's white blouse. A tiny feathered dart protruded

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from the skin of her neck. "It's so small she might never have felt it—or if she did she thought it was an insect bite. In two of the earlier killings we never found the darts. The victims must have felt them hit and brushed them to the ground as one would a pesky mosquito. In the first killing the dart was snagged in the victim's clothing."

"A dart gun of some sort?" I suggested. "An air pistol might have a fairly long range."

"In South America the natives use blowguns six feet long," Dr. Somerset said.

"I can't picture a murderer using one of those," I said. "He wouldn't stay invisible for long. Have all the killings been at this time of day?"

"All in the evening, but before dark. We doubled the police patrol after the second killing, and filled the Common with plainclothes men after the third one. Now I guess we should close it to pedestrians altogether."

"I'd advise against that," Somerset argued. "The killer would simply move elsewhere, or wait for the Common to reopen. You want to capture him, not scare him off."

"We're finished with our pictures," one of the detectives told Inspector Darnell. "Can we move her?"

"Sure. Take her away."

"Any identification in her purse?" I asked.

"Rita Kolaski, a nurse at Boston Memorial. Probably on her way to work."

The Inspector moved away from us without a goodbye, following the covered stretcher to the street. I turned to Dr. Somerset and said, "I really don't see how I can help here, Craig. Back home in Northmont I'm dealing with people and places I've known for six years. I know the way they live and how they think. I'm out of my element here. Boston people even talk different."

"I'm only asking you to look for something the rest of us might be missing, Sam."

"The killer is a madman, there's no doubt of that. And it's hard enough to catch anyone who's rational."

"Sleep on it, Sam. If you think you can help us in any way, see me after the first session in the morning."

They walked back to the hotel and Somerset asked the doorman to get him a taxi. "Aren't you staying here?" I asked, surprised.

The doorman ran down to the corner blowing his whistle for a

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cab, and Somerset fished a coin from his pocket for a tip. "No, I'm staying at home. My wife insists on it."

Up in my room I sat for a long time by the window overlooking the Common, watching the lights of the policemen as they searched the area of the killing. After a time I pulled down the shade and went to bed.

Another Common Killing, the morning paper screamed in a bold black headline. April read the story over breakfast and I admitted that Somerset had come to my room for help.

"You were over there, Dr. Sam? You saw the body?"

"I've seen a lot of bodies, April."

"But in the city like this—"

"She'd have been just as dead in Northmont."

"You've got time before the first session. Take me over and show me where it happened."

There was no talking her out of it, so we crossed busy Tremont Street and I showed her the spot where Rita Kolaski had died. We strolled farther into the park then, past the burying ground and all the way to the soldiers monument. Then we turned west, walking across Charles Street to the Public Garden that adjoined Boston Common.

"Look at the swan boats!" April exclaimed as we came to an artificial lake. "The people pedal them with their feet!"

She was like a child on Christmas morning, and I took her for a ride around the lake in one of the swan boats, knowing I'd miss the first session of the convention. Afterward we walked along the Arlington Street side, past the Washington monument and on up to Beacon Street. Presently, circling around the north side of the Common, we came to the State House with its golden dome glistening in the morning sun.

"The morning paper says the first body was found over on this side of the Common," April said.

"It doesn't concern me."

"Honestly, sometimes you can be so stubborn!"

"We're here to enjoy the city, not to solve murders. Come on, tonight I'll take you to the movie at the new Metropolitan Theatre. They say it's a regular palace."

We walked back across the Common, which was almost empty for ten o'clock on a weekday morning. The newspaper scare headlines were apparently having their effect. April left me at the hotel to do

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some shopping and I went upstairs just in time to catch the end of the opening session.

Dr. Somerset caught me on the way out. "I have a noon meeting with the Inspector. Care to sit in?"

"This business really isn't for me, Craig. April and I walked around the Common this morning. It's like a foreign country to me."

"There's one thing about the murders we didn't tell you last night," Somerset said, lowering his voice. "The killer has been in communication with the police."

"Just like Jack the Ripper."

"Exactly. Come along and you can see the letters."

Somerset knew how to pique my curiosity. There was no way I could turn down that invitation. I sat through the second morning session only half attentive, listening to a professor from Harvard Medical School discuss the latest polio research. The subject was much in the news that month, since Al Smith had just asked polio victim Franklin D. Roosevelt to run for governor of New York.

I offered to drive Somerset to police headquarters in my new Packard but he insisted we take a cab. They were easy to get at the stand near the hotel and during the day at least there was no need to tip the doorman. Riding up Tremont, I watched the faces of the people we passed, wondering if one of them might be the killer. In Northmont I would have known their names. Here they were strangers. In Northmont I might have had a half-dozen suspects. Here, the whole city of Boston was suspect.

"This is your city, isn't it, Craig?"

"Always has been. You should set up practice here and you'd learn what medicine is all about."

"Oh, I'm learning that."

"Six years in the country! Are you going to spend your life in Northmont?"

"Maybe."

"We've got three-quarters of a million people in Boston, Sam, and we need more good young doctors like yourself."

"Why?" I asked with a smile. "Is Boston the hub of the universe?"

"It could be. How many cities do you know that have daily steamship service to New York?"

"Maybe your killer comes up from New York by boat every week."

"No," Somerset answered seriously, "he's from this area."

We alighted from the taxi and walked up the steps of Police Headquarters. Off in the distance I could see the pointed tower of the

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custom house, the city's tallest structure. I had to admit that Boston had a certain charm. It was different from the simple country charm of a place like Northmont, but no less appealing.

Crime here was also different. The letters that Inspector Darnell spread out on the desk before me could only have been described as the work of a madman. *Last evening was the first of the Common killings! There will be more! Cerberus!* And another: *Two dead and more to come! Boston will remember me! Cerberus!* And a third: *Another must die because of what you did! Remember me! Cerberus!*

"And last night's killing?" I asked.

"Nothing yet." Darnell sighed and relit the stub of a dead cigar. "It's probably in the mail."

"These haven't been released to the press?"

The Inspector shook his head. "This sort of maniac thrives on publicity. We're trying to give him as little as possible."

"I agree completely," Somerset said. "The public doesn't even know the killings are connected, though it's bound to come out soon."

"The mayor wants to close the Common completely till this Cerberus is caught, but as you heard last night Dr. Somerset has advised against that."

"You need to capture him, not just send him into his hole."

I was studying the notes, but I could make nothing out of them. "I can't help you on this," I said. "I have no idea who he could be."

"That's not what we want you for," Craig Somerset said. "We want to know how he's doing it."

Inspector Darnell nodded agreement. "*How*, Dr. Hawthorne. We already know *who* he is."

I must admit their words took me aback. "You know who the killer is and you haven't arrested him?"

Craig Somerset smiled. "It's not like Northmont, Sam. In the city a man can hide out for months without ever being found."

"I didn't spend the whole of my life in Northmont, you know. Just the last six years. I know what city life is like."

But did I, really? Had I been away from it too long?

Inspector Darnell cleared his throat. "You must realize, Dr. Hawthorne, that what we tell you must go no further than this room. The lives of innocent people could be endangered if this Cerberus becomes aware that we know his identity."

"It was the curare that led us to him, of course," Craig Somerset explained. "It's not the easiest substance in the world to obtain, and

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once it was identified as the cause of death I began checking around at various hospitals and research centers in the Boston vicinity. As you may know, Sam, research is under way to find uses for curare as a muscular relaxant. It's a difficult task, because even in tiny doses it seems to cause nausea and a drop in blood pressure. But I found a research lab in Cambridge that's been running tests with the poison. About six months ago a quantity of curare disappeared from their lab, along with a part-time research assistant named George Totter."

"Why would he take it?" I asked.

It was Darnell who answered. "They laid him off. The research was being done under a grant from a local charity. When the money ran out, the research had to stop. Apparently Totter wrote to the city for more funds, but they ignored him. He made the remark to a co-worker that maybe they'd pay attention if a few people in Boston died of curare poisoning. Shortly after that he disappeared, and the lab discovered a vial of the poison was missing too."

"How much was in the vial?" I asked.

"Enough to kill twenty or thirty people. They didn't report it at the time because nobody believed Totter capable of murder. But when Dr. Somerset started checking for missing curare the story came out quickly enough."

"Is there any other possible source of the poison?"

Somerset shook his head. "It's highly unlikely. As you know, curare comes from the bark of various South American trees. The lengthy and laborious process is a deeply guarded secret among certain native families and tribes. Some attempt has been made to duplicate the process in a laboratory, but thus far researchers must depend on the real thing, brought in from the jungles. Our killer must be using a laboratory supply, and this lab in Cambridge is the only one that has it in this whole area."

"All right," I said, "I'll accept this man Totter as your killer. And I'll accept the fact that he could remain hidden in Boston for months. Now tell me why you can't stop him from killing these people."

Darnell ground out the stub of his cigar. "The darts are fired from either an air pistol or a blowgun. If he's using an air pistol of some sort he could probably be fifty feet away and still hit his target."

"Farther than that," I suggested.

"No, not with these hand-made wooden darts. We've tried it. After fifty feet they start wobbling and tumbling in the air. With a blowgun the effective range is only twenty-five feet. And there's our problem.

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These killings have been in broad daylight, in a park at the very center of a large city. There are no out-of-the-way trails or heavily wooded places in the Common. It's roughly an irregular five-sided park that's only seventeen hundred feet across at its widest point. You can see from one side to the other. There's no place to hide, except behind a tree or statue, and there are people constantly passing through—especially in the early evening hours on spring days like this."

"A blowgun disguised as a cane?" I suggested. "It would take just an instant for the killer to raise it to his mouth."

"Maybe for the first two killings it could have been something like that, but the park was filled with plainclothes police when the third victim got it. Yet nobody saw a thing." He picked up a folder on his desk. "Rita Kolaski, last night's victim, was actually under surveillance at the moment she was killed."

"What?" This was news to Dr. Somerset, and he reacted with surprise.

"I just learned of it this morning. She was suspected of being party to a Volstead Act violation. Two Treasury agents were following her in hopes she'd lead them to her boy friend who's been running boatloads of liquor in from Nova Scotia. She crossed Tremont Street at the corner beyond your hotel and entered the Common at exactly 8:10. There was still plenty of daylight and both agents had a good view of her. They were especially watchful of anyone who came close because they were waiting for a contact with the boy friend.

"But nothing at all unusual happened. No one even glanced at her. Nothing was pointed in her direction. She'd been walking in the park for only about two minutes when her walk became unsteady. She paused to lean against a tree and then collapsed. Our plainclothes men moved in at once, but it was too late. The Treasury agents filed a report with their superior and a copy was sent to me this morning."

"Surely she must have felt the dart hit her," I argued.

Darnell held up one of the feathered wooden shafts, half the length of a matchstick. "Notice there's the point of a common pin embedded in the wood. Don't touch it, there's still poison on it. When the dart hit it would feel like little more than a pinprick. She might have reached up to her hair, but the Treasury men would think nothing of that."

"I can't believe this pin point could carry enough curare to kill a

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person so quickly," I said. "Besides, what if she'd brushed it off her neck before the poison could act?"

"She didn't, and she died. We don't know how many people this Totter—or Cerberus—might have fired at. Maybe there's a dozen more that brushed the dart off and lived. All we know is that four of them died."

"Just where on the Common were the bodies found?" I asked.

Darnell referred to a large-scale wall map where four red pins dotted the green area of the Common. "The first one, Pete Jadas, was found on the other side of the Common near the State House. He was a former wrestler who'd fallen on hard times and taken to panhandling. Simon Falk, a young lawyer who'd been working late at his Tremont Street office, died right here, about in the middle of the Common. The third victim, a waitress named Minnie Wiser, died here, on the next walkway over from Rita Kolaski."

"Wrestler, lawyer, waitress, nurse," I mused. "I guess there's no pattern there."

"No pattern at all. He kills whoever happens to be handy."

I was staring at the map, but it wasn't telling me a thing. "What about that Cerberus signature?"

"A dog with three heads," Darnell snorted. "Greek mythology!"

"A dog from Hades," Somerset added.

"He must have chosen that name for a reason."

"What is reason to a madman?"

"All right," I said, getting up to leave.

"Where are you going?" Darnell asked.

"For another stroll on the Common."

It was the lunch hour now and the walks were more crowded. On benches people sat and chatted. One man was reading about the latest murder in the newspaper, but nobody seemed terribly concerned. They didn't know about the poisoned darts, or the letters from Cerberus.

I crossed over Charles Street to the Public Garden and went down to watch the swan boats again. That was when I noticed the man with the picnic hamper. He was dark and heavy-set, with unfriendly eyes, but the thing I especially noticed was the way he kept his right hand beneath the lid of the hamper at all times. He might almost have been holding something.

Like the trigger of an air pistol.

Whatever it was, he didn't look the sort who'd come here for a

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picnic. When he started walking back toward the Common, I followed, wishing that Inspector Darnell had shown me a photograph of George Totter.

The man's right hand was out of the hamper now, but still near its lid. I stayed just a few steps behind, watching that hand. When it moved, when the lid came up again, I ran forward. I needed only the briefest glimpse of the gun within and I slammed my fist down on the lid, pinning his hand inside. He let out a gasp of pain and released his grip on the hamper.

Then, before I knew what was happening, a second man spun me around from the rear. I felt a glancing blow to the side of my head and everything went black.

I must have been unconscious for several minutes.

When I finally came to, with a throbbing headache, I saw a circle of men bending over me. One of them was Inspector Darnell. "What in hell were you trying to do?" he demanded.

"I—"

"That was one of my plainclothes men you jumped on!"

"I'm sorry."

"You should be! If Totter was anywhere around you certainly scared him off!" He helped me to my feet and brushed the dirt from my suitcoat. "In the future you'd better stay off the Common, Dr. Hawthorne. If we need your help we'll call on you."

I mumbled more apologies and moved away, feeling like a fool. I just wasn't used to the ways of big-city police. Back in Northmont, Sheriff Lens could hardly be expected to fill the town square with deputies because he had only a couple of part-time men whom everybody knew. Here in Boston it was different, maybe too different for me. Had six years in Northmont changed my perceptions that much?

I found April in front of the hotel, asking the doorman for directions to Paul Revere's House. "I figured I might as well see some historical sights while I'm here," she said. "Want to come along?"

"I don't think so, April."

I turned my head and she noticed the bruise where the second cop had hit me. "What happened to you?"

"Just a little accident."

"Let me get you upstairs and wash that! Did you fall?"

"I'll tell you about it."

She listened to my tale with much clucking as she bathed the bruise with cold water. "You're not even safe from the police in this city!" she decided.

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"Don't be too hard on them, April. It really was my fault."

"Well, a gun in a picnic hamper! What were you to think!"

"They called Inspector Darnell right away. They must have thought they had the killer." I told her what I'd learned.

"Don't they have a picture of this fellow Totter?"

I shook my head. "And only a general sort of description."

I opened my medical bag and found a powder to take for my headache. Then I settled down to relax. Almost at once there was a knock at the door. April opened it and Craig Somerset hurried in. "I just heard what happened. Are you all right?"

"I guess I'll live."

"Good God, they didn't have to slug you with a blackjack!"

"I suppose they thought I was the killer."

"Darnell is sorry about it."

"So am I."

"The afternoon mail brought another letter from George Totter."

I came alert at once. "If it really is Totter. What does it say?"

"Darnell let me make a copy to show you. Mailed just before midnight from the main post office." He held out a page from his notebook and I read: *Four down and more to come! I won't wait so long next time! Cerberus!*

"What is Darnell's plan to do next?" I asked.

"Keep watching the Common. Hope they can spot him the next time. What else is there to do, except close up downtown and throw the city into a panic?"

"There were two Treasury men watching the fourth victim and they didn't see a thing. What makes Darnell think he'll see the killer next time?"

"Sooner or later —"

"Sooner or later! Doesn't Darnell realize he's dealing with an invisible man? Someone like Chesterton's postman who's there but isn't there?"

Craig Somerset pursed his lips. "Could it be one of the plain-clothes men assigned to the park?"

"Stranger things have happened. But if Cerberus—"

"What is it?"

"Just an idea. That map on Darnell's wall showing the location of the killings—do you think we could borrow it? Or make another?"

"What for, Sam?"

"You asked me to speak to the convention on the problems of country medicine. Suppose I speak instead on curare poisoning."

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"What? But you're no expert—"

"I think I've learned enough these last two days. Let's see, I'm scheduled to speak late tomorrow afternoon. Is that right?"

"Four o'clock."

"Good. I think I'll spend the morning out at that research lab, brushing up on curare." As an afterthought I said, "And be sure to post the topic of my talk on the schedule in the lobby. I want as large an audience as possible."

As the time for my speech drew near, April was beside herself. "What if the killer learns you're givin' this talk, Dr. Sam? He might pick you for the next victim!"

"Now don't you worry your head, April. I'll be all right."

But she stuck by my side all the way down to the second floor, where a big meeting room had been assigned for my talk. I looked out on the rows of chairs, just now receiving the first arrivals, and felt just the least bit apprehensive. But to be honest I think I was more afraid of speaking in public than of the murderer. Directly behind me the large curtained windows looked out on the Common across Tremont Street.

"He could be down there in the park, watchin' us through binoculars right this minute!" April said, obviously worried.

"I think he's a lot closer than that," I said, watching the doctors file in. I was surprised to see Inspector Darnell take up a position near the door. Somerset had obviously alerted him to the subject of my talk, in order to obtain the map I needed.

Exactly at four o'clock, with the room more than three-quarters full, Craig Somerset strode to the podium. "Are you ready, Sam?"

"Ready as I'll ever be."

He turned to the audience and spoke loudly so that his voice would carry through the room. "Gentlemen—and I note a few ladies with us today as well—our speaker this afternoon is Dr. Sam Hawthorne, a relatively young man who has spent his six years as a physician in caring for the ills of the people of Northmont, about two hours' drive from here. Yes, Sam Hawthorne is a country doctor—the backbone of our medical practice. He was planning to speak to us today on the problems of medical practice in a small town, but as most of you know he's chosen to change his topic. In recent weeks four persons have died on the Common across the street from this hotel. Only today the police admitted to the press that all four died of curare poisoning. And it is that poisoning—so rarely encountered

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in general practice—which is the subject of Sam Hawthorne's talk."

When he'd completed the introduction I stepped to the podium and began to read from my notes, covering a history of curare and the early experiments by Charles Waterton in Dutch Guiana. Then I touched on the Boston-area experiments before getting to my main point.

"You see behind me, on my left, a large-scale map of downtown Boston. The points where the four curare victims died are clearly marked. But as you know from my previous remarks, curare does not kill instantly. You might say, the police have said, that a poison which kills within a few minutes is instant enough. But the truth is that a person can walk all the way across the Common in a few minutes. I've done it.

"The idea occurred to me that the invisible killer the police are seeking might not be roaming the park seeking out victims at all. His poisoned darts might all be fired from one location, and it might have been the dying victims who moved rather than the killer. Looking at this map, is such a possibility feasible?"

There was a stir of interest from the audience and I saw Inspector Darnell straighten up in the back row. I glanced over at April and hurried on. "We've already seen that the speed with which curare kills depends very much on the size and weight of the victim. An average person lives only a few minutes. A thousand-pound ox lives forty-five minutes. I checked the weights of the four victims this morning, but even without knowing them I could make certain guesses.

"The first victim, a drifter who'd been a wrestler, was found on the far side of the Common near the State House. My guess was that a former wrestler might be the heaviest of the victims—since the others were a young lawyer and two women. In that I was correct. He weighed the most, and therefore—assuming the curare doses to be about equal—would have taken the longest to die."

I could see I had them now. The doctors were hanging on every word, and all my early nervousness had vanished. "The young lawyer was found in the middle of the Common, and the two women closer to this side. The latest victim, being the smallest of the four, died the quickest. She was actually observed entering the Common from Tremont Street, just down at the corner here. The lawyer, we know, was coming from his office on Tremont Street. The waitress and the ex-wrestler both could have entered the Common from Tremont as well.

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"I submit to you, Inspector Darnell, and to my distinguished audience, that the invisible killer is not in the Common at all, but right here on Tremont, hitting his victims *as they enter the park*."

My wind-up after that was anti-climactic. I couldn't give them the name of the murderer, so I ended with a few generalities about police work in poisoning cases, and then stepped back while Dr. Somerset said a few words of thanks. Doctors from the audience were grouped around me at the end, asking questions, but after a few pleasantries I made my escape.

"You were great, Dr. Sam," April assured me. "I can see Inspector Darnell coming our way."

"Come on, let's get out of here."

"Dr. Hawthorne!" Darnell called. "Let me have a word with you! I'm sorry about yesterday."

"That's all right."

"That was a very interesting theory. You seemed to be saying that the killer might be someone right around here. But how—"

"I have to go now." I broke away and headed for the elevator. If my idea was right, I could be in great danger.

Craig Somerset was hurrying after me too, but I jumped between the closing doors of the elevator and left him standing there with April and the Inspector. I knew it would be only a few moments before they caught the next elevator and came after me.

Downstairs I hurried across the lobby and out into Tremont Street. "Get me a cab, will you?" I asked the doorman.

"Certainly, sir."

He stepped behind me and blew his whistle and I felt the pinprick of a bite on my neck.

That was when I moved, as fast as I could, plucking the tiny dart from my skin and throwing myself on the uniformed doorman. Darnell and April and Somerset came through the revolving door as I wrestled the doorman to the sidewalk.

"Here's your killer!" I shouted. "Mr. George Totter, in person! April, there's a hypodermic needle in my right-hand pocket with an antidote for curare poisoning. I need it—hurry!"

What with all the police business and newspaper interviews after that, it wasn't till the drive back to Northmont the next afternoon that April and I had any time alone. "What a foolish thing to do!" she berated me. "Setting yourself up as a target for that madman!"

"Someone had to do it, April. The police were content to wait for the next victim, but I wasn't. I figured that the curare speech, ad-

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vertised in the lobby, would attract his attention. But I probably wouldn't have risked it if that research lab hadn't given me a hypodermic full of an antidote they've been testing."

"Who would have thought of the doorman!"

"Once I established the victims had probably entered the Common from the Tremont Street side I started looking for somebody who was stationed there regularly. The doorman, whistling for taxis—sometimes even going up to the corner to get them—was in a perfect position to fire those darts at people crossing the street to enter the park. People saw him put something to his mouth and blow, but it was such an innocent gesture for him that they never noticed it. His whistle—a long slender one similar to the ones London bobbies use—had a tube like a short pea shooter taped to it. The tiny darts would be inaccurate at more than five or ten feet, but the point was he could get quite close to his victims before firing. He chose people heading for the Common so they'd die there. In his confession he said he'd fired more than a dozen darts in all, but some missed and the others were brushed off by the victims before the poison could take effect."

"Dr. Sam, you purposely ran ahead of us all in the hotel yesterday. You knew he was going to try for you and you didn't want us in danger."

"I was sure he would try. All the killings were in the early evening, so I figured it was the doorman who came on duty in the late afternoon. He knew I was the curare speaker and I thought I'd offer him a tempting target."

"You were that sure it was the doorman?"

"People like that want to be caught, April. Totter was telling the police who he was in those notes he sent, only they didn't understand him. Cerberus was a three-headed dog from Hades all right—he guarded the entrance! The word is sometimes used to signify a watchful guard or doorkeeper."

"You did pretty good in the big city, Dr. Sam."

"But it's good to be home."

"And that's how I caught the Boston Common killer," Dr. Sam Hawthorne concluded. "He was invisible only because nobody noticed him. But this sherry is invisible because the bottle is empty! Come inside and I'll give you another small—ah—libation. And if you have time I'll tell you about what I found back in Northmont that summer—an impossible murder right in our general store."

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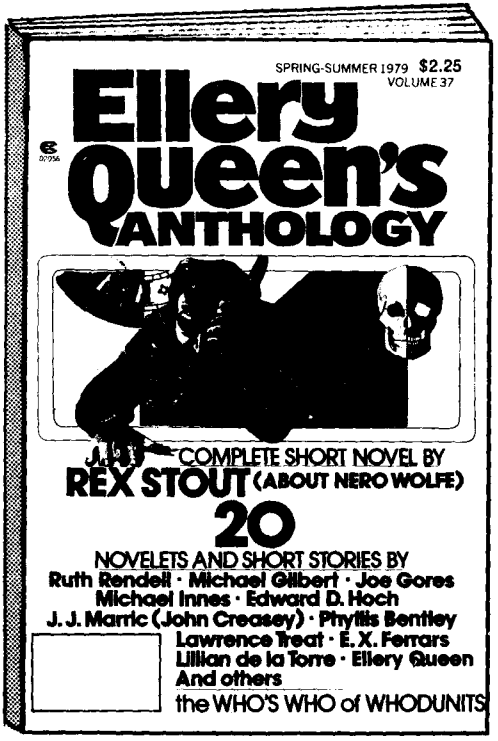
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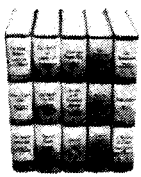

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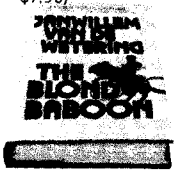

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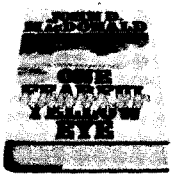

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